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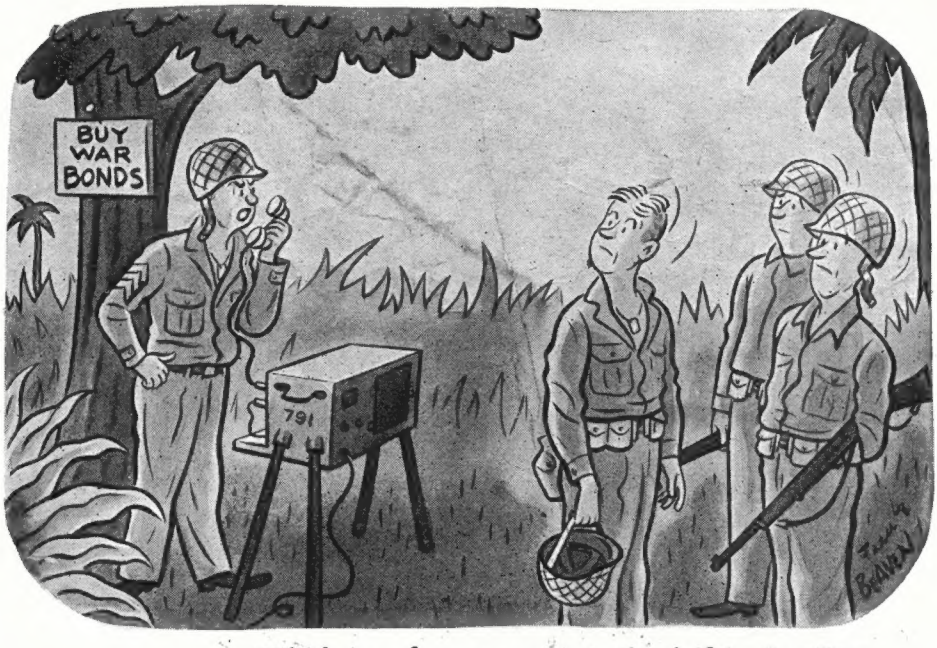

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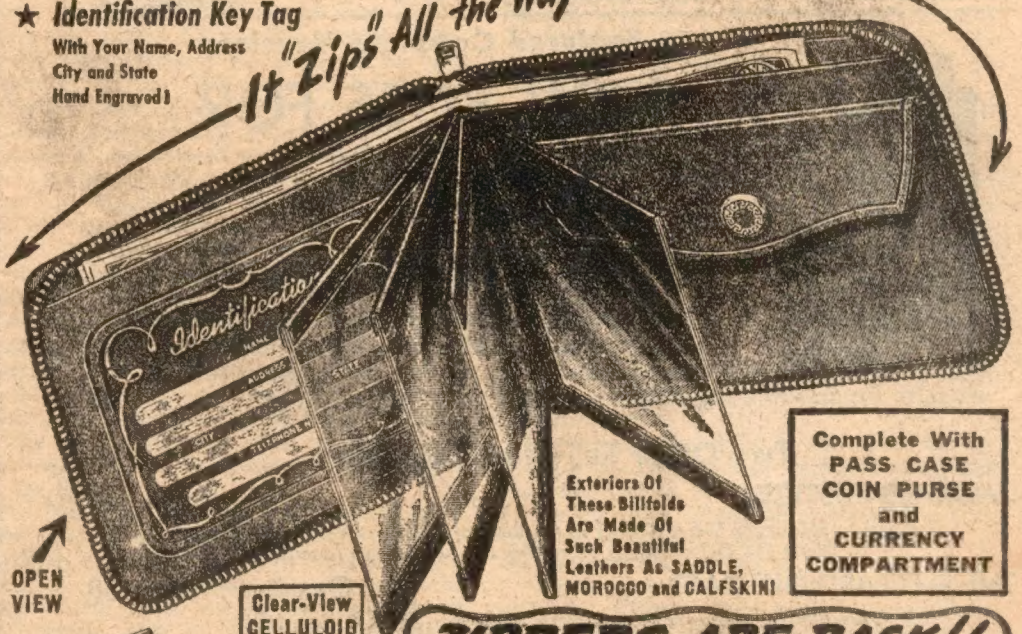

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LAW BOSS FOR A DAY

By

T. W. FORD

Young Deputy Val Hooks enlists wanted man Shad Tolban in a roaring campaign against a crew of vicious outlaws—and side by side they face desperate odds in grim gun combat! 11

Two Other Full-Length Novelets

JACKASS JUSTICE ..... Tom Gunn 38

When trouble stalks Indian County in the wake of a mule ranch project, Sheriff Steele and Deputy Watts prove they can be stubborn lawmen!

THE BLIZZARD OUTCAST ..... Gunnison Steele 58

Tossed to the wolves in a bleak white wilderness, Wick O'Hara follows a difficult trail that leads to justice and vindication!

Short Stories

THE HANDS OF A BLACKSMITH ..... Archie Joscelyn 24

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THE WATER OF DEATH ..... Scott Carleton 31

Buffalo Billy Bates battles a sinister trader

HAM AND THE SOUR KRAUTS ..... Alfred L. Garry 52

Sheriff Egg and Deputy Ham tackle a tough omelet of mystery

and

THE HOME CORRAL ..... Doc Long Trail 6

An entertaining and informative department for readers

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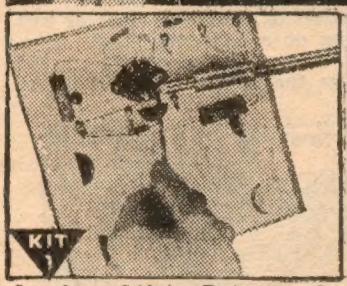

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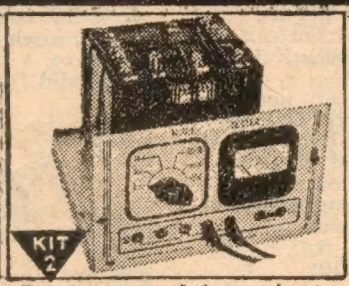

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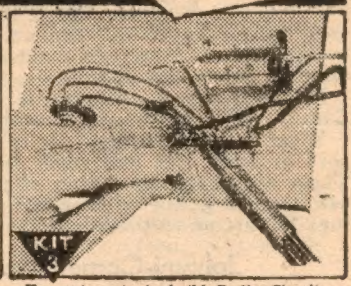

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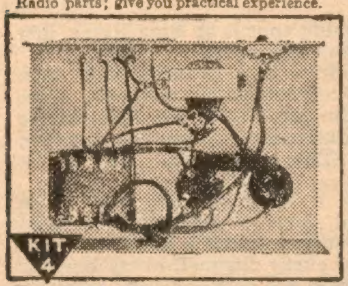

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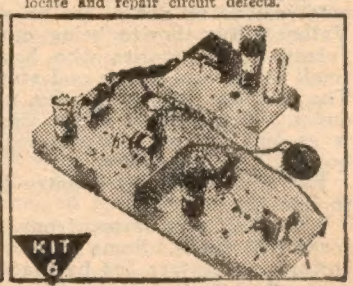

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The HOME CORRAL

A DEPARTMENT FOR READERS

CONDUCTED BY

DOC LONG TRAIL

HOWDY, hombres and hombresses! We're holding this get-together Out West, as usual. Me, I've got my soogans spread in the tall timber. I'm camped beside one of America's most beautiful wilderness rivers, the McKenzie.

Not the great Mackenzie of northern Canada. The McKenzie of central Oregon.

What is this country really like? What sort of folks live and work and play here? These are questions a heap of you writers-in ask, so I'm going to describe my surroundings in this up-to-the-minute report.

Johnny-Come-Latelies

The people? Well, the backlog of the small population is made up of early settlers who roamed up out of the broad Willamette Valley. But they're being outnumbered by Johnny-Come-Latelies who have cabins and small farms and stores and stop-over places. The rest are loggers, guides, sportsmen and dudes. Yonder, east of the Cascades Range, is grazing region occupied mainly by cowboys and sheepherders.

But this McKenzie country is our subject in this Home Corral.

The McKenzie rises from a number of forks and creeks. Some gush out from forest springs, others are fed by glacial snows and a few flow from high-up Cascades lakes. It flows down a dugged densely-timbered valley to meet the broad Willamette near Eugene, then to the Columbia near Portland 200 miles away and on to the sea.

A Fishing Region

A paved highway closely follows the McKenzie for 65 miles, and along it are small settlements with such pleasant names as Nimrod, Rainbow, Blue River. In some places the river is wide, a rifle shot across.

At other points are roaring torrents or chutes. Rapids, riffles, pools and long, glassy slicks. It is cold and brilliantly clear and the native trout in it are called "redsides" on account of their flashing broad crimson side stripes.

Fishing, of course, attracts most visitors —or did in pre-war years. Tourists aren't numerous now. Mostly week-end crowds from nearby Oregon points.

A never-to-be-forgotten adventure is a "drift" with a McKenzie boat-guide.

A "drift" consists of loading a dude or two in a car, hitching on a boat-trailer and driving up to a wide, gentle pool where the boat is slid from the trailer into the water.

The main launching spot is at Blue River, just a few jumps from my camp.

McKenzie guides are licensed and each boat bears a corresponding number, identifying him. The guide takes the oars, facing the bow. The dudes load themselves forward with fly rods. They shove off. The thrills begin.

Ahead looms a ledge or log jam. The water boils and leaps. Doesn't seem possible to get through without a smash-up. But the guide knows every channel, every boulder and snag. He eases the bobbing craft through.

The dude is supposed to keep his mind on fish and cast at likely spots. In good runs the guide backs water and slows up. If the dude hooks a good one, he pulls into flat water till the walloper is brought to net.

Real Sportsmen

I've observed that these McKenzie guides are mighty courteous in avoiding bank fishermen and their fishing spots. Was a time, they tell me, when there was a war on between boatmen and bank fishermen. Rock-throwing battles and a few shooting incidents. That has passed. Plenty of room for everybody. The guides are real gents and genuine sportsmen, setting the pattern for others.

A "drift" is from 10 to 25 miles. Two to four hours of concentrated excitement. Packed in that period is an experience that city folks talk about the rest of their days.

(Continued on Page 8)

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THE HOME CORRAL

(Continued from Page 6)

It looks mighty daring and dangerous. But upsets are almost unheard of, due to the guides' skill and also to the special type of boat they use. It resembles a dory. High, flaring sides, sharp upturn fore and aft. A boat like this shoots a rapids like a feather—with an experienced hand at the oars.

Oregon has heaps of other boating rivers, sure. But a "drift" on the McKenzie is considered a classic.

The Fly-Making Industry

This attraction naturally supports the local tourist industry—lodges, camps, gas stations, stores. Including the unique fly-making industry.

Let me tell you about one fly-tying expert, Smith Ely of Blue River. Smith and Stella, the pair of them, are busy the year round in their little shop beside the road. Their product is famous and shipped in quantity all over.

Let's go sit beside my friend Ely as his nimble fingers work over a tiny vise, making a convincing likeness of a living insect out of a hook, a wisp of wool, a wrap of silk thread and some chicken hackle or hair plucked from a deer hide beside him.

Smith Ely is a Western-born outdoorsman and his lore is made up of a lifetime of observation of wildlife.

As he works he'll tell you things you never heard or read. He knows the life history of the wide conglomeration of water-hatched flies that make up a trout's bill of fare.

If you're real lucky, after awhile he'll lean back, prop his specs on the end of his nose and look at the barometer on the wall. If the pressure is low or drooping, the time of day suitable and other complicated conditions appropriate, he'll get up, stretch the lean, straight six feet of him and say:

"Let's get the heck out of here."

He'll climb into a pair of long, patched waders, soled with loggers' calks or spikes. For the river is swift and the boulders slippery. He'll reach for his hat and rod and reel and five minutes away is a long riffle walled in by tall fir, cedar and maple and fringed with dense undergrowth.

(Continued on Page 75)

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On the diagram above the first note on the music is "G." You'll find that "G" is the white key between the first and second of the three black keys just above the middle of the keyboard. From this you can find the other notes. You'll be playing the melody of that famous tune, "Dixie." Now read below how you can learn to play any instrument this quick, simple, low-cost way!

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IF you are anxious to learn music but hesitate because you think it is too difficult, just follow the simple instructions in the panel above. You'll be surprised to discover that it is easy as A-B-C to learn to play, right at home, without a private teacher, by this remarkable short-cut method.

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An Action Novelet

Limp arms raised, Tolban walked out from behind the rock to surrender

LAW BOSS FOR A DAY

By T. W. FORD

Young Deputy Val Hooks enlists wanted man Shad Tolban in a roaring campaign against a crew of vicious outlaws — and side by side they face desperate odds in grim gun combat!

CHAPTER I

Wanted Man

RESTLESS, and unable to sleep because of his sudden responsibility, Val Hooks, young sheriff's deputy, heard the buckboard come out of the gully on the north road in the half-born dawn. There was the squealing outcry of an ungreased wheel hub, then a banging clatter as the careening vehicle caromed off those high boulders fencing the curve below the gully. There was urgency in the sound.

Young Hooks came off the cot in the sheriff's office of the jail, stamping into his boots and grabbing for his gun.

Through a barred window he saw the buckboard, with two figures on the seat, slamming pell-mell into Salazar. By the time Hooks had the front door open, and had swung his lean, raw-boned frame out onto the steps, the buckboard had halted before the jail.

"Hey, Sheriff—hurry!" the driver called. "I'm Eggleston, U.S. Marshal. Got Lorry Wilmot here, the killer—of the Tuffy Wilmot bunch! Hurry!" He made a half-strangling sound. "In bad shape!"

As Val Hooks leaped for the buckboard he recognized Eggleston, and saw that he had been badly shot up. The marshal sagged

over the reins, holding on to consciousness by sheer will power alone. Beside him, handcuffed to him, was the squat Lorry Wilmot, outlaw and killer, a tow-headed man with an inch-high forehead and the chill eyes of a wolf.

"This cussed badge-packer is as good as dead," he said with a sneer. When he spoke a gold tooth in his slash mouth glittered.

Despite the chill morning air, Val Hooks felt the sweat start on his forehead. He wished Sheriff Norcross had not led a posse out last night after that Broken Hills rustling pack, and left him alone in charge of the jail.

"Get him in a—cell," Eggleston muttered weakly.

His head was ringed with a blood-blotted bandage, and his shirt was crusted with blood from a body wound. He pitched over as the three went up the jail-house steps.

Working hurriedly, the young deputy got Wilmot unhooked from the marshal and hustled him into a rear cell. Returning for Eggleston, he had just lifted the marshal by the armpits when he sighted a man, vague in the dawn mist, down by the corner. It looked like Ab Mathone, the limping bar boss from the Pinto Saloon, who probably was just heading homeward after closing up.

HOOKS' young face hardened, his light blue eyes clouding with worry. Ab was an old gossip who never missed anything. More than once the sheriff had hinted he suspected Mathone peddled information to the lobos around that country. Cursing Mathone's inquisitive eyes, Hooks got the marshal inside and on the cot.

He gave Eggleston a slug of red-eye and said he would get the sawbones. But the ashen Eggleston shook his head.

"Don't waste time," he choked in a hoarse whisper. "I ain't—got long."

The whisper grew thinner as he went on. Back at headquarters, he said, were two witnesses who had seen Lorry Wilmot kill the mail car clerk when the gang had stopped the Limited over at Wagon Wheel Junction. Day before yesterday, the marshal had jumped Lorry before he could slick out a gun. But the Wilmot bunch had overtaken him and his prisoner.

After another slug of whisky, Eggleston went on painfully. There had been a tough gun battle. But when darkness fell, though wounded, he had managed to slip out with his prisoner and hide in the brush. Last night, he had picked up a buckboard, but now he had gone as far as he could.

"H—hold him!" he begged, breath fluttering. "You know Tuffy Wilmot—sw-swore he'd never let none of his family be—taken alive to be hung . . . Get word to Headquarters. G—get a posse here to hold—the jail. Tuffy might—might come and—"

Eggleston made a gurgling sound and Val Hooks stared into the slow-glazing eyes of a dead man.

Eggleston's final words seemed to hang in the very air—"Tuffy—might come." Might come? Why, blazing fire, once "Tuffy" Wilmot learned where his cousin was, he would come slam-banging in and take the town apart.

There was the time his brother, Jesse, had been a prisoner in the cuartel at Swellfork. Tuffy had led his wild bunch there against a whole parcel of special deputies, had burned half the town, dynamited the jail, and snatched his brother. Because of Tuffy's vow that none of his family should be hung it was almost a certainty he would come here.

As Hooks paced up and down the small sheriff's office, something his dad used to say came back to him.

"Worryin' over trouble," the old man had said, "is a waste of good time. Worry never stopped a single slug. When trouble cuts yore sign, act. Do somethin'—right or wrong. But do it."

Lips flattened against his teeth, young Hooks realized that, alone, he wouldn't have a chance if the Wilmot bunch tried to break open the jail. The sheriff had taken the younger gun-wise men of the town with him, and it would never be possible to drum up a pack of special deputies from the men who were left. Too many feared Tuffy Wilmot, because he had a rep for retribution. Draw against him and, sooner or later, he would come back and square the score.

"No help that way," Val Hooks muttered. If he only had an older head to advise him! Then he had it. He would run to old Hal Annis, the deputy before him, now retired. Annis could take over.

Hooks rode out of Salazar as the rising sun tinted the building fronts a soft pink. He had wrapped the dead marshal's body in a tarpaulin and placed it in a room behind the office. Anybody who happened in would not know the marshal had been there, or that Lorry Wilmot was in the jail. Provided, of course, that Ab Mathone hadn't seen too much and got his big jaw flapping.

It was not a long ride to Hal Annis' small outfit on Little Squaw Creek. Young Hooks drew up before the ranchhouse, dismounted, hustled up the steps—and stopped dead. Tacked to the closed door was a ragged piece of paper. Val Hooks held down the flapping paper and read:

Gone out to comb the hogbacks for strays. Will be back Thursday, I hope.

H. Annis

And this was Tuesday. With a chunk of lead for a heart, young Hooks headed back for town. He hadn't realized how much

Knocked from saddle, the rider fell, as the horse plunged on

he had been counting on Annis, not so much for an extra pair of guns, as to have the veteran Annis take over all responsibility. If the prisoner were lost then, it wouldn't be his, Val's, fault.

He swore as he rounded a bend in the trail where a wooded slope elbowed out from a hill. Then he galvanized in the saddle.

A rider was slowly emerging from a draw, slumped over the saddle-horn on a dust-coated bay mare. His sombrero dangled from a hand, his head was bent and there was no missing the streak of white running through his black hair. Into Val Hooks' troubled mind flashed the details of a wanted man's description that had been telegraphed from Benton.

THE wanted hombre was one Shad Tolban, charged with killing a man in a gunfight. Swarthy with a white streak in his black hair. Sawed-off—with broad shoulders. Weight, approximately a hundred and ninety pounds. When last seen, wearing a gray Stetson, black checkered shirt and jeans. Reward of a thousand dollars offered by the Benton Vigilante Committee for his capture.

And there had been the final curt words of the wire: "Wanted dead or alive."

That rider emerging from the draw was Shad Tolban! He fitted the description, and everything about him bespoke the fugitive. He was saddle-weary, listless with discouragement, and his pony was trail-jaded. It was Tolban all right. Val Hooks came alive, his left fist knotting around a gun butt. And at the same instant, Tolban lifted his head and sighted him. His fatigue was shed in a wink and his right hand snapped up with gun steel. The two men triggered in unison, the gun reports blending like thunder claps.

Lead whistled a foot from the deputy's sombrero as he spurred in. He slammed out another bullet, realizing his first had missed. It drilled the air where Tolban's head and shoulders had been. They weren't there, because Tolban's spent mount had stumbled, crashed over. Tolban was flung free, his sombrero rolling like a cart-wheel beside him.

Behind the downed bay, Tolban whirled as he regained his feet. He spat out dust and leveled his gun. The slug ricocheted from a rock a yard from the deputy. Tolban scrambled into the brush.

Val Hooks hit the ground running and zigzagged as he drove for the undergrowth. He knew what he was facing. Shad Tolban was a gunman, and the son of a gunman, "Sudden Sam" Tolban of Tombstone in its roaring days. Already wanted for one killing, Shad would be as desperate as a cornered wolf. But Hooks remembered his oath as a deputy.

Tolban's trail led around a stunted Joshua tree and across a hummock. Wriggling over it on his stomach, Hooks got behind a clump of sage. Over to the right was another hummock. Once behind it, Hooks would have his quarry outflanked. A shudder wormed down the deputy's backbone, then he spurted for the other hummock.

Sand just ahead of his left boot was flung up by a slug. Desperately Hooks threw himself directly at a boulder. Diving the last few yards, he found himself against the front of the rock unscathed.

"Give yoreself up, Shad Tolban!" he yelled. "It's the Law!"

"I'm not Shad Tolban!" the hidden man yelled back.

"No sense lying! Come out or I'm comin' after yuh!"

Cocking his gun hammers, Val Hooks edged to the tip of the boulder, inched around it. He could almost hear Sheriff Ed Norcross, standing over his grave, saying, "He was true to the badge he wore."

Another moment now and lead would hose from Tolban's hogleg.

"What the devil!" growled the hidden Tolban wearily. His guns were pitched out onto the sand. "Ain't got another danged shell left!"

Limp arms raised, he walked out from behind the rock to surrender.

CHAPTER II

Prisoner-Deputy

VAL Hooks slipped his prisoner into town unnoticed by coming through the mesquite behind the jail. There was a runaway team and wagon down the street so nobody was around when they stepped into the sheriff's office.

"What do they do down this way—rob the cradle for their John Laws?" Tolban said, with a quizzical lopsided smile.

As he stood with slightly bowed legs apart in runover boots, relaxed and smiling, he did not look like a man due to stretch rope. As with steady hands he fashioned a quirly the deputy noticed the end of a red scar showing beneath the sleeve on his left arm.

"For a gent due to become a cottonwood apple right soon, Shad Tolban, yuh're a cool one," Val Hooks said.

"Said before I wasn't Shad Tolban," the stocky man said casually.

"Think I'm a plumb chunk-headed fool?" Hooks snapped. "Walk ahead of me to the back there!"

He hustled him into the lone cell on the ground floor rear. Lorry Wilmot was on the second floor.

"Mighty poor view from here, Mr. Deputy," Tolban said. "I been in better jails."

Val Hooks left to get Tolban some breakfast—also to see how much the town knew. He passed a couple of men, who gave him only a "Howdy." When he entered the Pinto, "Turkey" Turner, the boss, was behind the bar. The deputy ordered some grub to take out with him.

"Whyn't yuh eat it here, Val?" Turkey twitted him. "Afraid somebody'll run away with yore jailhouse, hey?"

He was a jovial mountain of flesh with a greasy mustache, and known as the laziest man in the county. He never lifted a hand if he could help it, passing the days in a big rocker with a drink in his hand.

"Say," the deputy asked, surprised, "what're you doin' behind the bar, Turkey? Reformin' at last?"

Turkey guffawed. Joe, his daytime drink wrangler, he said, was going to take over the night shift.

"Ab Mathone, the night man, he got word his sister is right ailin' over to Poker Flats. So he's ridin' down to see her."

Val Hooks knew then that Mathone knew what had happened at the jail that dawn. The ailing sister was an excuse for him to head into the hills with word that Lorry Wilmot was now in the Salazar jail.

"Tuffy Wilmot'll be comin'," ran through the young deputy's head as he carried the grub to the jail. As he unlocked the front door, he remembered that he had not telegraphed to Division Headquarters that he had Eggleston's prisoner.

It would do little good to wire now. It was a three-day ride from Headquarters to Salazar, coming through the pass south of Tompkins Wells. Tompkins Wells! The name caught in his mind. A settlement, no more than a bump on the trail, with a few paint-peeling stores and some houses straggling out from the base of a bluff. But there was a one-room jail hooked onto the side of the general store. An idea began to percolate as Hooks moved back to Tolban's cell.

While Tolban tucked away the grub, Val Hooks lounged against the cell bars and studied him. And behind the hard-bitten look, he decided, there was something straight-forward about Tolban.

"Did yuh burn down that gent back in Benton?" he asked.

Tolban hesitated. "Suppose I tell yuh he called for it, and that it was a square face-to-face draw."

Somehow Hooks wanted to believe it had been that way. There was something about this man who had tried to bluff him from behind that boulder with a shell-less gun.

"In a cell upstairs, I got Lorry Wilmot, cousin of Tuffy," he said suddenly.

Tolban's fingers froze on the quirly he was building.

"Reckon I don't hear so good. Thought yuh said yuh had Lorry Wilmot a prisoner."

Val nodded. "Which means Tuffy Wilmot will be comin'."

"He's that way." Tolban shrugged.

"Sheriff's out with a posse," Hooks said. "Couldn't hope to hold the jail long alone against the Wilmot bunch."

"So?" said Tolban, after a moment.

"I'm goin' to snake him out of here and down the east trail."

"To Jackson City? They got a big strong jail-house there and a flock of deputies."

"That's how I hope Tuffy Wilmot'll figger it. But I'm takin' Lorry to Tompkins Wells. Nobody'd ever expect me to slap a prisoner in that lost hole."

Tolban nodded. "It's a gamble—but a good one."

Hooks had a quirly of his own going, and nodded into the smoke mushrooming from his lips.

"I'd have to leave you here alone when Tuffy comes. Too bad."

Tolban's leathery face wrenched. His eyes bored bleakly at the deputy as he came off the edge of the bunk.

"It was danged smart of yuh to tell me where yuh was headed, wasn't it, yuh cussed slick-tongued—" He broke off, little balls of muscle jerking at the hinges of his jaws.

BOTH knew how the ruthless Tuffy Wilmot worked. That time he had yanked his brother out of jail at Swellfork—after the authorities had moved the brother from Mesquite Forks. At the Forks, Tuffy had dragged out the only prisoner. When he had been reluctant to talk, Tuffy had worked on him with a Bowie knife. The poor devil had been a disfigured scarecrow for life.

Tolban laughed shortly. "What the devil! I'll just tell Tuffy where yuh're takin' his cousin."

Hooks nodded. "Uh-huh. And Tuffy'll drag yuh along to make shore yuh told him straight. I wouldn't want to be fillin' yore boots when he larrups into Tompkins Wells and don't find Lorry there."

"But yuh said—"

"Might change my mind—even head for Jackson City if Tuffy was sloping to Tompkins Wells. Why I could even cut off to a little cabin I know in the Split Rock country." The deputy shook his head. "Yuh shore are in a tough spot, Tolban. Yuh tell Tuffy the wrong place and he'll kill yuh."

Tolban went hoarse. "The Law's supposed to protect its prisoners!"

Val Hooks turned back. "I could give you one chance."

"What?"

"Tuffy will have his bunch fannin' out across the country. Chances are there'll be lead-swappin' before I get the prisoner through." He paused, looking hard at Tolban. "I could give yuh yore guns. You help me get him through, swearin' yuh won't try to escape, and at yore trial, I'll tell the judge what yuh done. It might get yuh clemency, Tolban."

"They won't hang me. . . . Nope, that won't do!"

"What yuh want?" Hooks feared he had failed.

"Yuh'd never have taken me prisoner if I'd had shells. All right. When we get back here after the trip, we go back to the same draw and smoke it out. Yuh can take it or leave it, Deputy!"

Val Hooks swallowed, then nodded. They shook on it through the bars. Half an hour later, with the manacled Lorry Wilmot between them, they left, with Wilmot wrapped in one of Sheriff Norcross' coats, to hide the fact that he was manacled.

After a long, hard ride, they moved out from the timber where they had ducked when two horsemen had come up the slope. Before them lay Dodge Bluffs, at the foot of a long low bluff over the river, glowing ruddily in the afternoon sun.

"Yuh'll never get me to Jackson City," Lorry Wilmot sneered. "Not before Tuffy catches up!"

Before crossing the little river, they swung up the nearer wooded side to come into the back of the town. Hooks led the way to the livery stable. He knew the owner, "Hop" Dillon, and knew he could be trusted.

Dillon dragged his club foot in from the alley to take care of their ponies. Val Hooks followed him down to a stall and spoke quickly.

"And remember," he warned, "yuh ain't never seen us, Hop!" Then he noticed the man's cut lip.

"Aw, that danged Stitch Evans claimed I charged him too much for his hoss and knocked me down," the livery man growled.

Tolban had eased over. "Stitch Evans?" he asked in a guarded whisper. "He was hereabouts?"

Both Tolban and Hooks knew about Evans —a big limping gent who posed as an itinerant card sharp, and had a way of turning up at a place before the Wilmot Bunch struck, though nobody had ever been able to tie him in with the lobo pack. But a man who once had wounded Evans had afterward been blasted down by Tuffy Wilmot.

"Better get some chow," Hooks said woodenly, after Dillon had told him that "Stitch" Evans had headed south.

They slipped out the back and into a Chinese eating-place next door. The handcuffs were removed from Lorry Wilmot before they entered, but Hooks sat with a drawn gun under the table to cover the man. Then the deputy tucked away some grub while Tolban watched the killer.

Wilmot eyed Tolban sourly from under the ragged hair that fell over his forehead.

"Yuh're a low-down traitor, Tolban!" he snarled. "Yuh're outside the Law yoreself. . . . Gimme some makin's!"

Tolban tossed him a tobacco sack. "A man can make a mistake," he answered calmly. "Once. But that don't make him a dirty coyote killer!" He turned to the deputy. "I'd like to drop into a place down the line—keep yore britches on—just like to find out if they's any word of my brother. He drops in there when he's over this way."

THEIR eyes locked. It could be a trick. Tolban might even return, keeping his oath to all appearances But he could get word to friends to jump the lawman out on the trail.

"Yuh're like all the rest of yore badge-packin' tribe!" Tolban spat out with quiet intensity. "Book-writ laws come before a human being! I gave yuh my word, but yuh got to think of rules!"

"Go ahead," Val Hooks said, rising. He shook his head when Tolban started to unshuck his hoglegs. "Make it short though!"

Tolban let the guns ease back into his holsters. He kicked back his chair as he moved away from the table. He let his eyes study the lawman for a moment.

"Just long enough to find out about my brother," he said evenly.

Val Hooks watched him as he turned from the restaurant and disappeared from view. He felt the first tug of regret.

He took Lorry Wilmot back to the livery barn. Lorry was whining about having to wear the sheriff's coat in the heat.

"Tryin' to sweat me to death, huh? Say, I'd like a little pasear to see a friend, too. My sister always drops in there when she comes this way." He cocked mocking eyebrows. "Yuh lunkhead! Think yuh'll ever see hide or hair of that gunny again?"

As the minutes inched by, Hooks began to sweat. Wilmot leered at him. Hooks thought of wire-tough harshly honest Ed Norcross who preached enforcement of the Law to the letter.

"All yuh got to do is execute the Law as she's written down," was his motto.

"Teacher, can I go outside?" mocked Wilmot, lifting his manacled hands. "I'll be right back. . . . Haw-haw-haw!"

Val Hooks swore hoarsely, then went into action. Hooking the manacle on Wilmot's left wrist through a hitching ring in a stable post, and turning over one of his hoglegs to Dillon, he told the stableman to wrap it around the killer's skull if he gave any trouble.

Then he headed for the main street.

CHAPTER III

Too Many Gunmen

IN THE first barroom Val Hooks investigated he saw nobody but a dozing bar boss and a couple of old-timers arguing about the big blizzard. He went across the street to another place. Green bottle-flies buzzed up from the half-leaf doors as he pushed in. Then what he saw hit him in the face like a blow. Tolban was about to die!

The man was backed against the bar, hands hooked over his Colt's butts, lips curled back from his teeth, huge shoulders hunched. Facing him across the room, fanned out, were three red-headed men, poised to draw. They were so alike it was plain they were brothers.

"Yuh got it comin' to yuh, Tolban!" one of them snorted.

Tolban grimaced. He packed plenty of nerve.

"I got twenty bucks at two to one that says I get two of you packrats before yuh cut me down, yuh Jonas coyotes!"

Back of Tolban a door at the end of the bar was inching open silently. The deputy caught the gleam of a gun barrel through the aperture.

"Get out," Tolban snapped to Val Hooks. "This is private business." Then his hands jerked from the holster tops.

Hooks hauled gun steel and threw it up as the opening door squeaked. Crouching, he triggered lead at that door back of the bar. Splinters sprayed from the door. There was a howl of pain from behind it, and then the sound of a man walking away unsteadily.

The Jonas trio let their hoglegs drop back into the holsters as they saw their dry-gulching play checkmated. One of them cursed thickly. Tolban eased to the door, calling to Hooks for them to drag their pins. Outside, they hustled toward the livery stable, guns bared and watching behind them.

"Them's the Jonas brothers," Tolban explained. "Old enemies of our family. My uncle crippled their dad in a gun duel. They never forgiven us. . . . But you didn't have to draw chips, Hooks."

Val Hooks gave him a hard eye. "It's the sworn duty of the Law to protect its prisoners."

Back in the barn they mounted and Dillon swung open the big door. In the van, the deputy was almost swept from saddle by the hail of lead that spattered into the barn front all around him. They plunged back into the barn and Dillon slammed the door. Leaping from saddle, Tolban ran to the back and hauled open the door that gave onto the feed lot. A gunshot greeted his appearance too.

He swore: "I should of known! Them Jonases got heaps of friends and relations in this town. They got us ringed in!"

The deputy built a quirly slowly, struggling to keep his head. But it looked as if his desperate scheme to get Lorry Wilmot through had blown up in his face. Hop Dillon walked around, wringing his hands, and Wilmot slouched in the kak, lip curled in a sneer.

"Now the tables is turned, huh?" he said, and guffawed. "They're huntin' a John Law for a change. How does it feel?"

"Button yore lip before I knock yore teeth out!" Tolban flung at him. He turned to the deputy. "I got yuh into this, Hooks. I ain't cravin' to get my chips cashed, but I'll go out there alone and—"

Val Hooks blinked as a wan beam of light from a window high up in the loft of the barn touched his face. He looked up.

"Wait!" he said. "There's a chance!"

"They'll be workin' in for a rush right soon," Tolban warned.

"And then a two-bit John Law and a mangy double crosser'll get theirs," Lorry Wilmot cackled.

Hooks was reloading his hoglegs. He looked over his other weapon, the gun in a shoulder rig.

"If they get in, Lorry," he told his prisoner grimly, "I'm savin' one slug for you."

Hastily he went up the ladder to the hayloft. Reaching the begrimed window in the front of the barn, he pried it open and looked down. Just ten feet below was the roof of a store that fronted the road. He squeezed through the opening and dropped onto the roof.

Lead plunked into the barn door.

"Get 'em out, Dillon, or we'll burn the place over yore ears!" a man bawled.

Doubled over, the deputy moved along to the front of the store and, removing his sombrero, peered over. At the corner of the livery stable alley stood the tallest of the red-headed Jonas tribe. His hat lay back on his shoulders by his chin strings as he peered around the corner.

Even as Val Hooks worked over the low false front, he saw the heads of two others appear over the railing of a porch across the way. Then the deputy dropped to the ground.

Thudding into the dust behind the tall Jonas, he went to one knee, but bounced up to slam the hogleg from the amazed Jonas' hand with a blow of his gun barrel across the wrist. A man jumped from behind a tree and leveled his gun.

"I got a nervous trigger finger!" Hooks yelled as he jammed his gun muzzle in the

redhead's side.

He prodded the man down the alley to the barn.

"Saddle up another pony, Hop," Hooks ordered when they got inside. "We'll take this hairpin out with us as a hostage!"

He lifted Jonas' other gun and lashed his arms with a pigging string.

"That's Luke Jonas," said Tolban.

"Well, you handle him," the deputy ordered after they got the sullen redhead boosted into the kak of a newly saddled mare. "If he makes trouble, give him the same dose I got for Wilmot."

With Val Hooks and Tolban riding the flanks, they moved into the alley, then out onto the road. Eyes followed them from inched-open doors. A man with a lathered face peeked from the edge of a shade in the barber shop.

"Better move faster," Tolban said calmly. "One of 'em might risk a shot."

As they swung into a lope, a bullet winged high over their heads. Instantly Tolban put his gun against Luke Jonas' red head.

"It's that deputy from Salazar!" a man yelled. "And one of them gents is handcuffed!"

Too late Val Hooks realized that he had neglected to remove the deputy's badge from his vest. With a signal to Tolban, he spurred his own and Wilmot's horse on harder. Suddenly Wilmot's mount swung over, and bumped Luke Jonas' mare. Then Wilmot's right foot hooked in under Jonas' left stirrup and hoisted powerfully.

The swaying Jonas, unable to grab the saddle-horn with his arms lashed behind him, struggled for balance, but plunged off his horse, rolling in the dust. Shots screeched around Tolban and Val Hooks. Yells went up.

There was no time to recover their hostage. With Tolban showering curses on Lorry Wilmot, they pounded out of the town, and on southward along the creek bank. Half a mile down, the stage road turned into a narrow V-shaped canyon which they entered.

"Pretty danged smart, ain't yuh, Wilmot?" Val Hooks said hotly as they dropped to a steady gallop.

Now there was a chance of two packs being on their back-trail instead of just the Tuffy Wilmot outfit. And because of the gun ruckus it was known that Hooks was a John Law with a prisoner. Plain sign had been left behind for Tuffy Wilmot.

Some time later, with the canyon already dim in the twilight, Tolban pulled up and squinted to the rear. He pointed at an angle toward where the segment of sky framed by the high, precipitous walls glowed ruddily. Drifting up against the sky was a pall of dust rising from the canyon bottom. Pursuit!

Now it was just a question of whether the pursuers were the Jonas brothers and their friends, or the Wilmot bunch. As the fleeing men rounded a bend, Val Hooks knew they would have to make a stand sooner or later. Their ponies were not fresh enough for a long pull.

Ahead he spotted the fork in the canyon, with one branch leading toward Jackson City, and the other sloping upward. Val Hooks came to a trigger-quick decision. He looked over at Tolban and saw he had already guessed it.

He nodded. "Yep, it's only me the Jonases want."

"All right," he said. "You take the smaller fork, Shad."

"I told yuh I ain't Shad Tolban!"

Hooks wondered why that should be important at that moment.

"Shore — Mesquite Bill or Sagebrush Harry!" he flung out short-temperedly. "You go that way. Mebbe yuh can throw 'em off the track. That branch comes out on the upper Snake. Pretty much wooded up there, too. If it's Tuffy Wilmot, I'll do the best I can."

"If it's Tuffy, I hope this cayuse can run," Tolban said dryly.

"Remember, yuh gave yore word not to escape," the deputy said. "If yuh get free, yuh've got to swing back to the jail." That sounded pretty weak now.

"I'll be there when you get back," Tolban promised. "Hasta manana."

Tolban rode up the branching fork. Lorry Wilmot spat at a lizard that darted from behind a rock.

"Yuh figger ever to clap an eye on that two-bit again?" he jeered. "When the marshals take me over—if they do—I'm telling how yuh as good as gave that hairpin his freedom! Yuh'll be busted for keeps!"

As they rode on in the main canyon, Val Hooks wondered how big a fool he had been. His thoughts grew bleaker as the gloom thickened. When Ed Norcross learned how he had let Tolban go, he would probably demand his badge. Norcross would say he should have tried to take Lorry Wilmot through alone.

He might come through all right yet, though, if he could once get safely across the bridge at the Yellow Snake with Wilmot. But there would still be the missing Tolban to explain.

A couple of hours had passed and they were nearing the end of the canyon. The walls were lower and less precipitous. Soon they would be on the boulder-strewn flats of the Lost Tombstone country, the last dash before the bridge, and so far they had run across only one man—a fellow watering his team at a spring.

A small stone bounced across the alkali ribbon of trail ahead. Grabbing the bridle of Wilmot's horse, Val Hooks wheeled into the purple shadows of some scrub jackpine.

"Give one sign," he warned, "and I'll put

a crease in yore skull with this gun barrel!"

A shape stirred on the shale in the trail and veered their way.

"Is that that sheep-faced Wilmot pullin' on a quirly so it looks like a torch?" called a voice. Tolban's!

Hand shielding it from the deputy's sight, the captive had his smoke gleaming like a live coal, to show where they were. He cursed as Tolban rode in behind the trees.

"You threw 'em off?" the deputy demanded.

"They didn't come," said Tolban.

He told how, moving up the branching canyon, he had failed to see any trail dust rising in his rear, so finally he had scrambled up to a high ledge and used his field-glasses.

"I could see clear back to the fork from there," he said.

"And there was nobody?"

Tolban picked up the reins.

"There was a bunch parleying with a man on a wagon who'd just come out of the canyon where you'd gone."

Val Hooks' face fell. Lorry Wilmot snickered. Tolban went on to say that the bunch had disappeared into the main canyon, but nobody had come up the branching fork.

"Could you tell whether they were with the Jonas brothers?" the deputy asked.

Tolban shrugged. "They did one strange thing. They sent one rider back down the big canyon before they went on. I couldn't figger no reason why the Jonases would do that. So I cut across the ridge to head yuh off and warn yuh."

"We got to get out of the canyon and to the bridge before they catch up with us!" Hooks exclaimed, then paused, studying Tolban's weathered visage. "Shucks, man, you didn't have to come back!"

"Aw, you sided me against them Jonases, didn't yuh?" Tolban said gruffly, then both started to grin.

In that moment, they were off guard. Hooks had his back to Wilmot, but heard the killer drop from his horse. Then he darted into the clump of jackpine, his boots making the dried twigs crackle.

Val Hooks hit the ground and darted to the clump nearest the trail to cut Wilmot off that way. Tolban cut up to the other end.

"Don't shoot!" the deputy cried. "The noise'll show where we are!"

Behind the clump he crept forward, a gun drawn to club with.

"Come on out, Wilmot! Yuh haven't got a chance!"

CHAPTER IV

"I'll Hold the Bridge!"

LORRY WILMOT darted out the way he had entered the clump, clasping something in his locked hands. He flung himself at his pony, standing beside the deputy's mount and brought down on its romp the sharp rock he had grabbed up. With a neigh of pain the animal bolted off in a panic, galloping wildly down the canyon.

Val Hooks scrambled over the shale toward his own pony to go in pursuit, but he saw that the stampeding horse was not going to pull up soon. And pursuing horsemen, perhaps the Wilmot bunch, might be coming from that canyon.

Tolban rode down on Lorry Wilmot, cursing him.

"Don't, Tolban—don't!" Hooks commanded as he saw Tolban's uplifted gun. After all, it was his duty to protect his prisoner. And Lorry Wilmot stood there snickering with satisfaction.

"He can ride double with me," the deputy decided, grimly.

Swiftly he unlocked Wilmot's handcuffs and manacled his arms behind him so that he wouldn't be able to grab a gun. Then he remounted and Tolban hoisted Wilmot up behind him none too gently.

"You fall off," Hooks warned the killer,

[Turn page]

"and I'll come back. But not to pick yuh up. To put a bullet in yore head! Sabe?"

He sped away with Tolban following hard.

A wind had risen, and its increasing force seemed to tug at them and hold them back as the canyon floor became a series of sharp rises. Hooks cursed the wind. They would be unable to hear the approach of their pursuers. He kept glancing backward.

"They'll be comin'—don't worry, Lawman," Lorry Wilmot taunted.

The canyon seemed endless. The deputy's horse was slowing markedly before they had ridden far, and Tolban's mount wasn't in much better shape. The canyon floor had become hoof-clogging sand. They had to shut their eyes as the wind flailed them with a cloud of it.

They had put a couple more miles behind them when Tolban, glancing at the crest of the right side of the canyon, cried:

"Into the shadows! Into the shadows!" He was pointing to where the now low side wall slanted down to where the canyon emerged into the boulder-strewn Lost Tombstone flats. Instantly Val Hooks had a gun out.

"One squeak out of you, Lorry, and yuh'll be shakin' hands with the devil pronto!" he threatened, as he drew up in the dimness.

Filing from the side wall ahead riders were silhouetted against the moon. From the rifle boot of the second horseman's saddle projected a crutch. Stitch Evans, the lame card sharp and undercover man for Tuffy Wilmot!

"Yuh can't get away now!" Lorry Wilmot kept whispering in a gloating refrain, and though the deputy's gun was in his side he knew that a gun report would bring those riders seething into the canyon.

There were five of them, including Stitch Evans. They rode down from the canyon wall and gathered in a knot on the flatland. Tolban wanted to rush them, banking on surprise. But Hooks shook his head. The thing now was to get over the bridge and to Tompkins Wells unnoticed.

Now he understood why a rider had been sent back from the fork, as Tolban had said. That rider had carried word to those of the bunch who were scouring the country south of Dodge Bluffs. And they had hit for the end of the canyon. And the rest of the outfit would be closing in from behind.

Hooks dug the Colts deeper into Lorry Wilmot's ribs. This sneaking coyote killer had done this. They would have been out of the canyon by now if he hadn't stampeded his pony. And Hooks was grimly determined to get his prisoner through in spite of the devil, high water, or Tuffy Wilmot.

"Make up yore danged minds—get goin'!" Tolban was hissing toward the riders at the edge of the flat.

As if they were obeying the unheard order, they swung into a gallop and headed across the Lost Tombstone country.

The deputy still had to wait. There would be no sense barging out there only to be spotted on the trail. Cold sweat filmed the faces of Hooks and Tolban, but the confident Lorry Wilmot only hummed from a dance-hall ballad:

And the gal in the red dress kicked so high, kicked so high—"

"I'll kick out them gold teeth of yores," Tolban promised.

It was like rawhiding the nerves to have to sit there and know that from the rear Tuffy Wilmot, probably, was getting closer and closer.

FINALLY, after another dragging tension-freighted minute, Val Hooks nodded and they rode out of the canyon. As the full glow of the pallid moon bathed them it was like suddenly being denuded.

They forced their jaded cayuses to the limit as they swept across the boulder-strewn terrain. There were sharp rises and abrupt dips into shallow hollows. But always, on both sides were the upended slabs of rock and grotesque boulders that had given the country its name. They loomed out of the moonlight like prehistoric monsters closing to strike.

Another mile went behind the ponies' hoofs, then Tolban was thumbing to the rear. Hooks swiveled his head and stared past Lorry Wilmot's beard-stubbled jaw. Strung out along the trail, came the pursuing pack. And on the head of the lead rider was the cream-hued sombrero that was Tuffy Wilmot's pride.

Leaning over the neck of his straining pony, the deputy tried to urge the animal to more speed. But he knew it was hopeless, even as Lorry Wilmot guffawed. Hooks glanced over to Tolban. There was nothing to prevent the man cutting off into the tombstonelike rocks and saving his own hide. But he didn't.

Another backward glance told Hooks that the pursuers were closing rapidly. But there were no shots. They didn't want to risk hitting Lorry.

The fugitives topped a short rise. Ahead lay the bridge over the Yellow Snake River, a plank structure with rickety-looking side rails spanning the thirty odd foot gap between the high precipitous stone banks. The river was an ochre thread twisting through a gash in the Lost Tombstone country, more than a hundred feet below the bridge. And even as the hoofs of Tolban's pony spattered thunderously on the planks, Val Hooks knew what had to be done.

The hope of reaching Tompkins Wells unobserved now was gone. But with Stitch Evans and the other pack on the trail ahead to Jackson City, the Wells was still the only

alternative.

Hooks yelled to Tolban to pull up and they came to a sliding halt at the other end of the bridge, the only crossing for a half-day's ride in either direction.

The deputy slid out of saddle.

"Climb into that hull and take Lorry through to Tompkins Wells," he told Tolban as across the bridge, around one of the slabs of rock, appeared the galloping Tuffy Wilmot.

"No, I—" began Tolban.

"Don't be a fool!" Hooks said hotly. "They'd catch us in a few more miles."

He yanked his third gun from his shoulder rig and, dropping to his knees, began to thumb shells from his cartridge belt into a little pile.

"I can hold 'em here for hours!" he said. "Put yore horse down in that hollow there! Hurry! Get Lorry to the jail in Wells and tell 'em to get words to Division Headquarters to send for him pronto."

He came to his feet. Their eyes met.

"Best trail pard I ever hope to see," Tolban muttered.

Val Hooks grinned a little, and their hands met.

"You ain't any two-bit yoreself, fella," the deputy said. "Yuh shore have measured up, right up to the hilt. Get Lorry to Tompkins Wells and—and keep ridin', Tolban. Adios!"

"Adios," muttered Tolban. . . .

The first shot blazed in the moon-painted stillness of the Lost Tombstone country. It came after the pack the other side of the bridge saw only one horse and two riders heading off to the south. It reverberated across the rocky slabs, Tuffy Wilmot bawling orders in its echoes. His pack came slamming at the bridge.

Crouched behind his screen of brush, the deputy kept his weapons silent. His one advantage was that they didn't know where he was yet. The lead riders pounded closer, until Hooks could make out white-hatted Tuffy's heavy features.

The buffeting wind sent a cone of blinding dust across the bridge. It wiped out the Wilmot pack for precious seconds. Hooks felt a big drop of sweat tickling the tip of his chin. Well, he thought, the Lost Tombstone country was an appropriate place for a jasper to get his chips cashed.

Then the bridge planks were thudding as the dappled pony in the lead hit them. Val Hooks rose a few inches and the guns in his hands smashed out their lethal song. That lead rider caught a slug dead center in the chest. Knocked from saddle, he rolled under the rail and over the river. The cayuse plunged on, tail straight out in the wind.

Another horse reared with an almost human scream of pain, throwing its rider. And a slug fanned viciously close to kid deputy's cheek.

He came to both feet then with a strange calm. The weapons bucked in his lean hands. He swiveled one toward the roaring Wilmot. Another horseman went straight up in the stirrups, arms outflung. When a bullet slashed the hand-rail close to Hooks, a splinter slapped him across the jaw. But he released an empty gun and grabbed up his third weapon, the one from his shoulder hide-out.

Vaguely he was aware of the odor of burnt gunpowder stinging his nostrils. Vaguely he wondered how long he could stand them off.

A rider dashed from a tall boulder and cut for the bridge. But the deputy's shot nailed him in the shoulder. As he cursed and veered off, his sombrero flew free to reveal the red head of one of the Jonas tribe. The two bunches had thrown in together!

Then, as the wind whisked away the gunsmoke, Val Hooks realized that he had done it, for a few moments at least. The pack on the other bank were already pulling away. He shook his ringing head, hardly able to believe it.

In the lull, he caught something like a muffled gunshot from the south.

CHAPTER V

Outsmarted

BACK by one of the big slabs of rock on the flats, Val Hooks saw the men confabbing around Tuffy Wilmot. The deputy reloaded, wondering what their next play would be.

Then they all turned his way and walked their horses toward the bridge. They came on steadily, not even bothering to fire. Faintly Hooks heard one of them laugh. Then some instinct made his head jerk around—and he knew the answer.

From around a bend on the trail to Jackson City came Stitch Evans and the four riders with him. They were trying to slip in behind him. En route to Jackson City, they must have met a rider headed out from that town who had told them he had seen nobody answering the description of a deputy and his prisoner. So Evans had turned back.

The deputy knew his number was up. Even as he looked, Evans rose in the stirrups and bellowed. His bunch came tearing down the grade. Wilmot's men wildly spurred their ponies across the bridge. It would be just a matter of moments.

Val Hooks flung two shots at Evans'

bunch. One rider pulled out of line, hand slapped to his head. Then the cornered deputy threw down on Wilmot's men.

"Handle them! I'll take the ones up the trail, Val!"

Tolban wriggled from the brush and put his back to the deputy's. Tolban whipped up two guns and they spat out their harsh song.

The very surprise of rushing two pair of guns instead of a lone man changed the story. Val Hooks came off his knees and jumped forward to hack away at Tuffy Wilmot's pack. From behind him came stunned cries as Evans and his handful rode smack into Tolban's savage fire.

Hooks saw Tuffy Wilmot streak out from behind a boulder afoot and dodge toward the bridge. But when he fired, Wilmot dived flat and seemed to vanish. At the other side of the bridge, a rider dropped dead beside his pony. Another buckled over the saddle-horn, and turned tail.

Somebody screamed an order through the gun thunder, then they were beating a retreat from the far side of the bridge. Tolban had won his side of the battle too. Stitch Evan's pony stood with reins dragging on the ground, and the crafty Stitch lay beside the dragging reins. Another man sat in the middle of the alkali strip, moaning over a smashed knee. The rest had disappeared.

"Goin' to rain before mornin', I reckon," Tolban said dryly, as he sleeved at sweaty powder grime on his leathery cheek.

"Uh-huh." Hooks matched his nonchalance. "But it will be warmer and. . . . Say, what brought you back, yuh mule-headed fool?"

Tolban looked sheepish. "My tribe don't let nobody do their scrappin' for 'em. Yuh brought this on yoreself when yuh pitched in with me when the Jonases had me treed, and . . . Oh, shucks, mebbe I was curious."

"By grab, where's Lorry?" Hooks exclaimed. "Did yuh let him go?"

"Shucks, no," Tolban said, and told how, as they had been wading a little creek Lorry Wilmot had hooked a spur up into the horse's belly. The plunging animal had broken a foreleg.

Tolban's face twisted and he glanced down where crimson stained his trouser leg.

"Just a nick," he declared as he lowered himself to the alkali trail.

Val Hooks glanced over his shoulder. Three riders who had paused back among the rock slabs were still there as if undecided. Tuffy Wilmot's white hat was not in evidence.

"Good thing yuh give me the key to Lorry's handcuffs," Tolban said. "When I had to shoot the hoss I handcuffed Lorry to one of its front legs. If he wants to haul a dead hoss down the line, mebbe he can escape." He laughed a little to hide a grimace of pain. "I—"

"Can hand over the handcuff key—and both of yuh claw for a star!"

Val Hooks whirled—and froze. Tuffy Wilmot seemed to have risen out of the ground beside the bridge, a Colt in his big hand and on his coarse-featured face a smirk of triumph. He had crossed on the trestle-work beneath the bridge.

Val Hooks had stuck his freshly reloaded weapon into a holster, to thumb fresh shells into another gun, the useless one he now held. His third lay over by the clump of brush. Automatically his hands started up and he let the empty weapon plunk in the dust. Tolban had put down his own guns when he had seated himself.

Tuffy Wilmot thrust his head forward and laughed coldly.

"I always swore no badge-packer would ever get one of my family hung."

FURY churned Val Hooks' insides. He felt cheated and all sense was burned away by blinding intensity inside him. He kicked up the deep alkali in a dust cloud with one stroke of his boot, then flung sideward toward that Colt beside the brush clump. A bullet winged by his head as he went flat and clawed for it. But he got it, and fired twice.

There was a gurgling sound but no more shots. The dust was fanned away by a fresh puff of wind, like a curtain being pulled aside, revealing Tuffy Wilmot as he reeled backward, pawing blindly for the handrail of the bridge. A look of sheer disbelief was on his face, as if he could not understand how a man dared make a play when he had him covered.

He failed to catch the rail. His boot heels chomped into the dried brush. One of his hands tried to lift toward a spreading patch of crimson on the front of his blue shirt. Then he dropped from sight as suddenly as he had miraculously appeared, pitching backward out into space over the river.

* * * * *

Two days later in the bright sunlight of forenoon, Deputy Val Hooks and Tolban turned up the side street to the Salazar jail. When they had reached Tompkins Wells with the dazed Lorry Wilmot, they had bumped into a couple of U.S. marshals who were looking for the late Eggleston. The marshals had taken charge of the prisoner, and Hooks and Tolban had returned to complete their contracted deal, the promise Tolban had exacted from Val Hooks before consenting to help the deputy.

"All right," Tolban said quietly as they dismounted before the jail. "I've kept my word. Now—"

Val Hooks nodded. "I'll just take a look inside first. Then we'll ride out to that spot where I captured yuh, Tolban."

The door opened and bearlike Ed Norcross appeared in it.

"By gum, it's about time yuh put in a showin'!" he roared at his deputy. "Walk out of the office and leave a dead marshal in the back room and—"

"Hold yore wind!" Hooks snapped back, to his own surprise, as he and Tolban mounted the steps. "Eggleston was half dead when he brought Lorry Wilmot in three days ago at dawn."

"Lorry Wilmot! By thunder, boy—"

"Will yuh keep yore lip buttoned up till I get through?"

Val Hooks had been through too much to stand any hurrawing. He was tougher at the core by far than he had been that morning when the sound of Eggleston's slamming buckboard had roused him. And the last move, what he had before him now, didn't soften his mood.

He went on to relate in cut-and-dried outline how he had slipped Lorry out before the Wilmot bunch hit, and had taken him through to Tompkins Wells.

"What?" the amazed Norcross barked. "Yuh smoked it out with Tuffy Wilmot and got him?"

"Drilled him plumb dead center and knocked him into the Yellow Snake," Tolban put in. "Anybody drinkin' out of there for a year'll be poisoned shore as shootin'."

Young Hooks concluded his story with the turning over of Lorry Wilmot to the marshals. The deputy thumbed toward Tolban. A rider had pulled up outside but nobody paid him any heed.

"This hombre here, I—I sort of ran into him, and he helped me plenty. I never'd have got Lorry through if it hadn't been for this gent."

"Wait a minute!"

Norcross cocked an eye at Tolban, studying him, then snapped his fingers as he grabbed a holstered gun with his other hand. He had a prodigious memory and was always poring over reward handbills and the descriptions of wanted men.

"Yuh danged idiot!" he blasted at Val Hooks. "This here's Shad Tolban, wanted for a killin' in Benton! Yuh make a play for a gun, Tolban, and I'll ventilate yuh!"

Tolban folded his arms on his chest, hands well away from his gun scabbards.

"I'm not Shad Tolban!" He shook his head so the lock of white hair jumped. "I am—"

They were interrupted by the entrance of a stooped, burly man powdered with trail dust—Al Sutner, town marshal of Benton, an old friend of Sheriff Norcross.

"Hello, Al!" the sheriff greeted. "Glad to see yuh. We got Shad Tolban here, by thunder! Yuh had a wanted out for him."

Sutner peered at the stocky Tolban and chuckled.

"Howdy, George," he said to him. "We got Shad, but yuh don't have to worry none. Another witness turned up who saw the shooting. He swears Bellows drew first. So I reckon Shad'll be exonerated at the trial."

"But this here is Shad Tolban!" Norcross yelled.

"Nope, Norcross," Sutner assured him. "He does look some like Shad, his uncle. But this is George. Shad ain't got no scar like this." He pointed at the red mark that showed beneath Tolban's left shirt sleeve. "This is George Tolban, all right. And, by grab, I ought to fan his pants with a gun barrel. He put on a rig like Shad was wearin' and laid down a false trail for the posse for days. Interferin' with the Law, I call it. . . . Got a drink, Norcross?"

"But the white streak in the hair," Val Hooks spoke up. "They both got it?"

George Tolban grinned sheepishly. "Just some white paint I slapped on."

And now as Hooks peered at it then, he noticed how it had become speckly looking.

"About that drink, Norcross," Sutner reminded. . . .

WHEN Val Hooks and George Tolban stood out in the sunshine again, the young deputy fitted the pieces together. George had been posing as Shad to draw the posse away from his fleeing uncle. That was clear enough. Then something else struck him. Now he wouldn't have to go out to that spot on the road and smoke it out with Tolban. He started to grin with relief. Tolban seemed to read his thoughts.

"I never intended to swap lead with yuh, Val," he said, "if we'd gone back to that place where yuh captured me. That was just a trick so's I could get loose and help Uncle Shad, if he still needed it. Honest! Any more than I tried to hit yuh the mornin' yuh grabbed me. I was just a-tryin' to scare yuh off with my last shells."

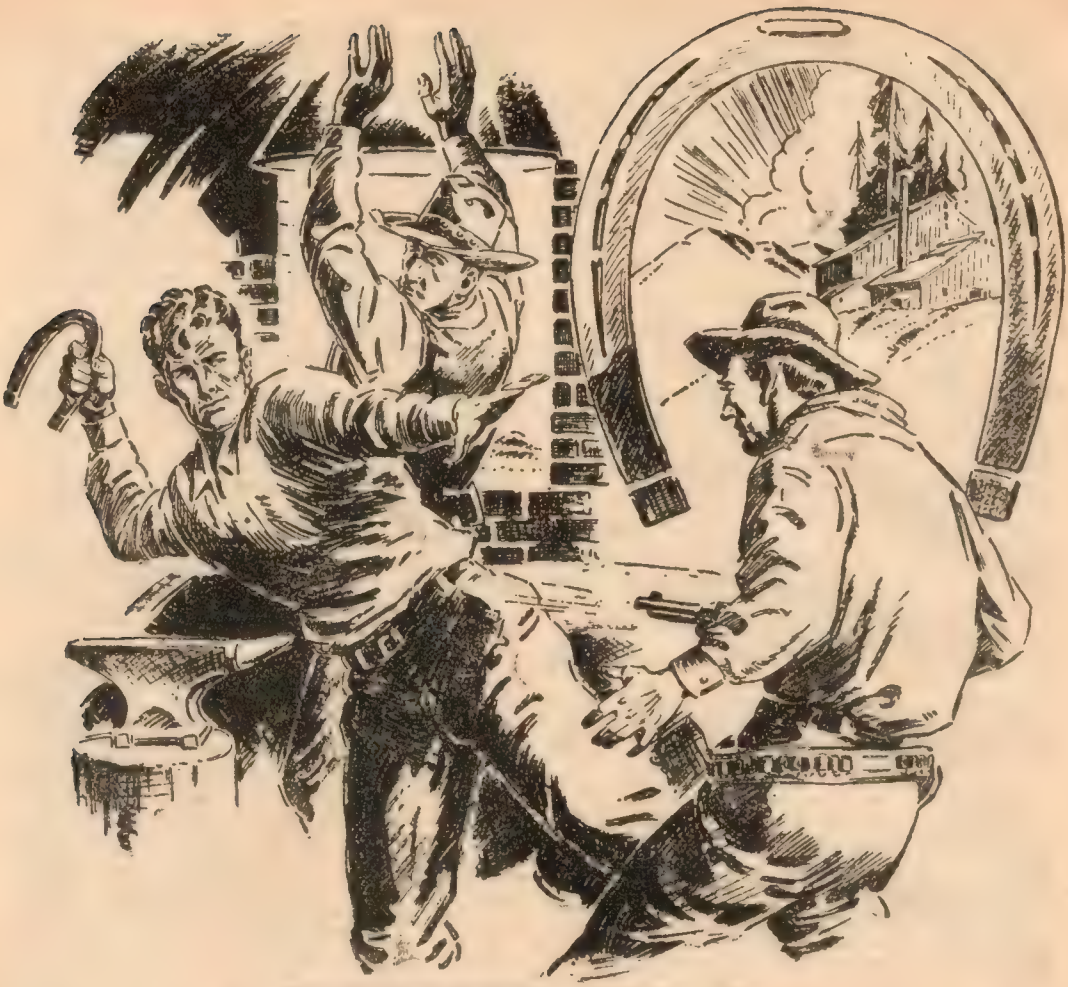
Chuckling, Hooks poked him lightly on the chin. "Come on, feller. Looks like I owe yuh a drink for callin' yuh by yore wrong handle so long."

Tolban swung into stride beside him. "Yuh're buyin' the drinks because I outbluffed yuh when we made the deal before leavin' the jail with Lorry Wilmot, Val! And I'm thirsty!"

"What do you mean, outbluffed me?"

"I made yuh take my proposition before I threw in with yuh. And the truth is that if it'd been the back door of perdition yuh was leadin' me into, I'd have gone along, because me and Tuffy Wilmot was old enemies. Uncle Shad and me smoked it out with him and two of his men once. Even wounded Tuffy himself. He'd have killed me on sight. . . . Well, it was a nice pasear we had anyway."

Next Issue: **DOVES OF PEACE, an Exciting Complete Novelet by OSCAR J. FRIEND**



Nels spun about suddenly and hurled the shoe.

THE HANDS OF A BLACKSMITH

By ARCHIE JOSCELYN

When Horses Walk on Golden Shoes, Nels Johnson Knows It's Time to Settle His Feud with a Rival Smith!

THE big black horse was a vicious brute. In the three months that he had been working for Hardenburgh, Nels Johnson, who looked like a soot-smudged Viking, had shod a lot of mean cayuses. But nothing to match this one.

The black, one of a team, had lost its right fore shoe. The horse had acted up plenty when Nels was trimming the hoof and fitting a new shoe. Now, with the shoe ready to nail in place, Nels called for aid from his boss.

"Hold him with the tongs while I nail this shoe on."

Hardenburgh, busy at his own forge, voiced a jeering laugh. Pushing back a heavy thatch of stiff brown hair from a sweaty face, his fingers added to the grime already there. Not much older than Nels himself, Hardenburgh had become increasingly hard to work with of late. Ever since Nels had quietly demonstrated that he could shoe a horse faster and better, and beat his boss at any kind of blacksmithing.

"What's the matter?" Hardenburgh sneered. "You afraid of the black? I thought I hired a blacksmith when I give

you a job."

Nels controlled his temper with an effort. He usually asked old Billy Reed, a bald-headed oldster who assisted both of them to help him. But Billy was out just now.

"I notice you use the tongs with a horse like this one," Nels said. "Will you hold him?"

"Oh, sure, I'll hold him," Hardenburgh finally agreed, crossing the shop and picking up a pair of tongs.

When the tongs were clapped across the nostrils of a vicious horse and held in place, the animal would stand quietly while being shod. Any pull would hurt its nose.

His jaw jutting a little, Nels picked up the black's hoof, turning his back on his employer to do so. With the hoof held expertly between his legs, Nels fitted the shoe in place. The big black trembled uneasily for a moment, then stood still. Confident that the horse would remain so, Nels swiftly drove in a nail, clinched it. He drove a second one on the opposite side of the shoe and hoof. He was reaching with the prongs of his hammer to catch the nail's protruding point and turn it over, when it happened.

Without warning, the big black reared up, standing on his hind legs, front feet lifted several feet off the floor as far as the halter would permit the horse to rise. The sharp point of the nail protruding from the edge of the hoof caught in Nels' leather apron. The next instant he found himself hoisted off the floor.

He had time for just one startled look, time enough to see Hardenburgh calmly grinning to himself over by the door, instead of holding the horse quiet with the tongs. The next instant the black came down again. Nels found himself face downward on the floor, with eighteen-hundred pounds of horse towering above him.

For a dragging second Nels lay there, unmoving. Then it dawned on him that though he was in there between the four hoofs of the horse, none of them had come on top of him. He turned, scuttled his way out from under. The black, mean to the tips of his laid-back ears, snorted again and jumped in a deliberate effort to trample him. But Nels got away safely.

HIS face white beneath its grime, eyes burning, Nels untied his apron and flung it into a corner. He was half-way to the door when Hardenbaugh, who had returned to his own forge and was grinning, turned with a startled jerk of his head.

"Hey," Hardenburgh yelled. "What's the idea?" Whyn't you finish shoein' that horse?"

"You can shoe him yourself, without the tongs, if you feel that way about it," Nels snapped.

Hardenburgh stared incredulously. Then his face reddened.

"Yeller, eh?" he taunted. "I knew it all along. You're fired!"

"You can't fire a man who has already quit," Nels retorted, and he stalked out of the shop.

Out in the sunshine, Nels stood for a moment with a grim expression on his square-cut face. The tide of anger slowly ebbed.

There was a big cottonwood tree standing right across the road beside an old empty building. Nels had come to love its grateful shade. In the three months that he had been in Sodbuster he had thought of this little crossroads town as home. He didn't want to leave here. By jiminy, he wasn't going to!

He was only twenty-two. But he knew that he was a better all-around blacksmith than Hardenburgh. As good as any Nels had ever met up with. He could get that empty building across the street. He'd set up his own shop, and see how Hardenburgh liked having competition.

By the next afternoon, Nel's preparations were pretty well completed. At the general store he found a pair of anvils, a couple of old forges, and all the lesser equipment a blacksmith needed. The main thing required was skill and a strong pair of hands. Nels had both.

Excitement mounted in the town as his break with Hardenburgh became known, and his intention to set up in opposition right across the road. Hardenburgh strode across the way to stick his head inside the door of the new smithy and scowl.

"Better not be a fool," Hardenburgh warned. "There ain't trade enough here for two shops. I'll run you out of town."

"Try it," Nels snapped. "And see who runs first."

That evening Nels had a second visitor from the other shop. Billy Reed, the old bald-headed shop helper, came in and looked around appreciatively.

"You got a nice place here, Nels," Gilly said. "You'll be needin' a helper, won't you?"

"Guess I could use one, Billy," Nels agreed. "Providin' I get any business to pay a man."

"I'll risk it," Billy nodded. "I'll start in with you in the mornin'. I about got a crawfull of Hardenburgh's cussedness, too."

Nels was pleased. He liked Billy. Though the oldster was no such blacksmith as either Hardenburgh or himself, Billy was a good all-round assistant, and a fine man to work with.

Hardenburgh wouldn't like losing him.

Hardenburgh didn't. But after a few days the ugly-tempered man got himself a new assistant who was more like himself.

The rivalry between the smiths grew to a

sharp thing in town. There was scarcely enough work to keep both shops busy, but Nels was getting his share of what there was. When work slackened off, he went out and rustled up work, any sort of blacksmithing, on the farms or ranches. He and Billy had no cause to complain.

Then Nels began to note a gradual change. The feud between the two shops was just as hot as ever. Hardenburgh made no secret of his dislike of the young upstart, or the fact that he intended to run Nels out of the country. But more and more business seemed to be coming to Nels' shop, vicious kicking horses and mules, every job that was particularly hard and disagreeable.

"Looks to me like Hardenbaugh's sendin' all the mean jobs acrost to us here," Billy said. "Hopin' mebby you'll get killed, or somethin'."

"I've noticed that," Nels agreed. "Let him keep it up. It's that much more for us, and we can handle 'em."

"Yeah. He's drinkin' a lot lately, and not doin' much. Seems to have plenty money, though. Somethin' funny somewhere."

That angle of it didn't worry Nels. His shop looked like a blacksmith shop now, with rows of horseshoes hanging from nails on the walls and on the cross-beam, with various brands of the irons he had made burnt into the walls.

The interior of the smithy was becoming pleasantly grimy from smoke. The forges and anvils showed signs of constant use, and the half-tubs of water used for cooling shoes and irons were charred around the edges. Nels loved every smell of scorched hoof and burnt leather apron, every bit of it.

A TEAM of big mules was pulling up outside, then being unhitched and led inside. Nels surveyed them dubiously. They were fine animals, almost cream-colored, groomed, well-fed and saucy.

He had seen them more than once, but they had never been in either smithy here in Sodbuster. Those two mules had the reputation of kicking the hat off a man's head without batting an eye. They were always shod at another town, where they could be put in the ox-stalls for safety.

"I've heard what a good blacksmith you're gettin' to be, Nels," the mule owner said with a geniality that had a false ring. "So I thought I'd have you shoe my mules. I'm pretty particular about them."

"We ain't got no ox-stalls," Billy interrupted bluntly.

"We'll shoe 'em," Nels said. "Bring them in."

Billy looked at him questioningly, but said nothing more.

Once the mules had been haltered to the wall, Nels lifted down a lariat rope, built a loop, and tossed it. Though no one in this town was aware of it, he'd tried his hand as a cowboy for nearly a year. He had become adept with a rope before finding that his real ability lay in blacksmithing. To rope a mule by one foot wasn't too hard.

Stretching the first mule's leg back, Nels tied the other end of the rope to the far wall. Forced to stand on three legs and barely balance on the fourth, the mule could do no kicking.

Billy grinned and went to work.

"We'll show Hardenburgh, durn his hide." With the mules shod, Billy went home to supper. As no more work was likely that day, he wouldn't be returning.

Nels still worked around the shop, sharpening a plowshare for want of something better to do. The evening was long, but he liked to work.

Nels looked up as a new team pulled to a stop outside.

"Hey, there," the driver called. "This bay needs new shoes all around. Can you do it now?"

"Sure," Nels agreed. "Bring him in."

The driver unhitched, tied the one horse to a wagon wheel, and led the bay inside. Nels' eyes narrowed a little as he blew up the forge.

For all he could see, the shoes on this horse were in pretty good shape, so good that the animal didn't need to be shod again for quite a while. And its shoes were certainly no worse than those on its mate, which was to be left without any change.

That was a small thing, but Nels had a hunch that something wasn't quite as it should be. However, if new shoes were wanted, it wasn't his business to argue.

He pulled the old shoes off the bay mechanically, tossed them onto the considerable pile of other old shoes already stacked in the corner, and went on with his work. With the job done, he helped the driver hitch up and be on his way.

Dusk was falling outside now. The interior of the shop was gloomy.

Nels was a little tired. It had been a busy day. By rights, he should be closing up and getting to bed. Well, he'd do that in a minute. But a little maggot of doubt kept gnawing in his mind. There was something funny here, something not quite right. Some of those old shoes on the last horse had been mighty heavy. Nels remembered they hadn't clanged quite in the usual way when he tossed them on the pile.

He crossed to the pile of old shoes, picked the four of them out. Excitement began to course through his veins. He knew that he was right. Two of the old shoes were considerably heavier than the other two. The lighter ones clanged naturally as he tossed them aside again. With his curved hoof knife, Nels cut into one of the heavy shoes. His lips puckered in a soundless whistle as a slab of metal peeled off easily in a golden

crescent.

Gold! There was no doubt in his mind now. Those two horseshoes were gold, not pure gold, but pretty largely so. They had been painted black, and they hadn't been on the hoofs of the bay for more than a few miles, else the paint would have worn off completely.

It was plain enough that the last horse hadn't needed new shoes. The animal had been brought into the shop for a definite purpose. Nels had a pretty strong hunch that he knew what that purpose was.

TWENTY-FIVE miles back in the hills was the Golden Glory mine. It was a rich gold mine, operating at capacity. For weeks, Nels had been hearing common talk of the losses which the Glory was suffering. Whether some of its workmen were high-grading ore, or exactly how the theft was being worked, no one seemed able to find out. But it was common knowledge that thousands of dollars of gold were being stolen every month, and gotten out past the noses of the operators.

There were only two roads out from the Golden Glory. One led through Sodbuster. Both roads guarded, day an night, as were all other possible exits from the mining camp. Everyone who left the mine was subjected to search, yet the losses had continued at an alarming rate.

Nels nodded slowly. Here, he decided, was the answer. Somebody up there at the mine was a good blacksmith. He was getting his hands on that stolen gold, melting it up in a crucible, and molding it into horseshoes. The horses coming out from there were shod with gold. Once outside, the golden shoes were removed, regular shoes substituted. So far, it had worked perfectly.

That was all understandable. But why had this horse with its two golden shoes been brought to Nels for a fitting with new shoes?

Nels rasped a sledge-hammer across his stubbled chin thoughtfully. There was something funny here. Did that fellow who had been driving the team figure to slip back here during the night and quietly pick up these golden shoes from the discard pile? That was possible. But it seemed unlikely to Nels that anybody dealing in such a dangerous scheme would risk letting any blacksmith have the handling of such shoes. Yes, there seemed to be a mystery in the shoe-pile.

If a search were made here, things could be made very unpleasant for Nels. If those golden shoes had been planted here to be found by the law, Nels' denial wouldn't be too convincing. The sheriff might say that any good blacksmith would soon discover in handling that those shoes were not of steel.

But where should Nels hide them? If a search were made, it might be pretty thorough.

Then he grinned slightly, and stepped outside. At the back door was the manure pile, where leavings were thrown each day from off the floor. Forking up a corner of the pile, Nels slipped the shoes down under, threw a few more shovels from the floor carelessly on the pile, and locked up the shop.

He was just snapping the padlock when two new arrivals rode up on horseback. Nels' pulse quickened a little. One of them was Sheriff McGahan, who didn't often come this way. The other man he didn't know.

"Evenin', Nels," McGahan greeted, dismounting. "I want you to meet Curt Ingalls. He's from the Golden Glory."

"How are you?" Nels nodded.

He didn't shake hands, or say that he was glad to meet Ingalls. He was becoming more and more convinced that this was a frame-up.

"Just closing up?" McGahan asked. "Sorry to disturb you, Nels. But could we look around your shop a little? To tell the truth, Ingalls has received a sort of tip-off that might be a clue to where some of the missing gold is going. You don't mind?"

"If you want to look around, go ahead and look," the smith said. "Are you accusin' me of havin' a hand in the thefts?"

"Oh no, not at all," McGahan said hastily, too hastily. "But we have to run down clues, you know."

"Yeah, I guess you do," Nels acknowledged.

He rather liked the sheriff. He could see that McGahan didn't relish this job. Nels unlocked the door and lit a lantern. Though the visitors tried to make a show of looking around in general, their real interest in the pile of discarded horseshoes.

Then Nels saw something else. Across the road, Hardenburgh had gone home hours before. But now Hardenburgh was back at his shop again, keeping in the shadows, but watching with avid attention what went on.

Nels frowned. How should his old employer know about this? Hardenburgh was the man who had declared that he was going to get Nels, to run him out of the country.

SHERIFF McGahan was searching feverishly now, looking at each horseshoe in the pile, stopping to file some of them, then passing to all the other shoes in the building. He poked around in corners, into old boxes, climbed to the loft. The law man went outside and circled the shop, kicking in the grass and weeds.

Nels, grinning to himself, could see that the hunt wasn't going as the law expected.

But with the sheriff knowing something, it was plain that the horseshoes couldn't be used as a means of getting the gold out of the mine any longer. It looked as if the guilty

ones had figured on using the gold shoes as a means of framing Nels. The trick seemed to point directly across the road.

Finally the sheriff and the mine man apologized for the trouble they had caused.

"I'm really sorry about this, Nels," McGahan declared. "It was just a false alarm, and I'm glad it was. I didn't put any trust in it, though you could be used as a tool without knowing it."

"I'm not that big a fool, Sheriff," Nels said.

He watched them ride away. Locking his shop, Nels strode down the road toward his room. But at the turn he stepped quickly off the trail and circled back to his shop. The two horsemen were not returning. But Nels saw Hardenburgh snooping disappointedly.

As soon as his former boss had disappeared, Nels retrieved the two golden horseshoes. Here was a small fortune. Each shoe, he judged, might have five hundred dollars worth of gold in it.

So they'd tried to frame him, eh? Well, it didn't pay to get him mad. He didn't get mad often, but when Nels did, he meant it.

Business had been so good that Nels had bought himself a saddle pony. Ten minutes later he was riding out of town. He didn't want to be disturbed again.

A few miles out, he rolled in his blanket and slept. He had breakfast at a ranch where he had previously done some work. It was nearing noon when Nels rode through the pass in the hills to the land-locked Golden Glory properties. He passed guards, but since he was riding in, not out, no one had challenged him.

Men looked at him curiously as he rode up. He asked to see the foreman.

Presently Buckholz appeared, a tall, heavy-shouldered man, who looked as if he knew his business.

"Well?" he asked.

"My name's Johnson," Nels explained. "Nels Johnson. I'm from Sodbuster."

"Oh yes," Buckholz said. "You're the new blacksmith there. I've heard of you, Nels. What can I do for you?"

"The sheriff came and searched my shop last evenin'," Nels said bluntly. "He was lookin' for a trace of the gold you're losin'. He didn't find any there."

"That's all news to me," Buckholz said. "I wish he could find where the leak is. I don't know anything about it. Maybe Ingalls found out something and told him. He's workin' on the job."

"Ingalls was with him," Nels agreed. "I think I got something to tell you," he added, dismounting. "Where can we talk alone?"

"Right over here in my house," the foreman agreed readily, and led the way.

It was an oblong two-room house, built up against the edge of a cliff, with a solid rock foundation under part of it. Inside, Nels looked around appreciatively.

"Nice place you got," he said. "I got to get me a better house, too. One with a cellar. Good for keeping spuds and cabbage."

"Guess a cellar would help," Buckholz agreed. "And you Swedes like your sauerkraut, don't you? They could easy have built a cellar under this house, but they didn't."

"Well, here's what I wanted to show you," Nels said. He reached into a capacious pocket of his coat and pulled out the two horseshoes. "They're gold."

He recounted how they had been brought to his shop, and what had transpired. Buckholz' excitment mounted.

"Gold!" he breathed. "And that's how they've been getting the stuff out right under our noses! Talk about ingenuity! You've really hit on it, Nels, for a fact, and I appreciate it. But why didn't you tell the sheriff?"

Nels shrugged.

"It looked like a frame-up to me," he said. "To get me in bad. Maybe not, but I didn't like it. I don't think the sheriff was in on it, but if they found the stuff there, what choice did he have? I thought I'd rather tell you, so you could handle things."

"I guess you did the sensible thing at that," Buckholz said. "And I'm glad you did, Nels. I'll know what to do now. First we'll eat. I like to do my own cooking, when I have time, and with a guest, I'll take time now."

He talked while he dished up a good meal. They ate. But Nels could see that the foreman's mind was busy with all that had been disclosed. He scraped back his chair.

"I'll have to set a few wheels in motion," Buckholz said. "You stay here, Nels. It will take maybe an hour. Then I'll be back. I'll ride out with you."

NELS agreed, lounging back in a chair. It was pleasant to take a day off once in a while. Half an hour passed, then the door opened and Buckholz walked in. Behind him was Sheriff McGahan.

"I'm sorry to have to do this, Nels," McGahan said, "but Buckholz has sworn out a complaint, so I haven't any choice but to arrest you. I just came this way to see him."

"Arrest me? What for?" Nels came to his feet, blinking. "What the blazes!"

"He says it's a clear case of you being guilty, Nels," McGahan explained. "You got scared last night, so you brought the horseshoes to him today and tried to make out like you were innocent. Like I say, he swore to the complaint, so I ain't got no choice."

Nels followed the sheriff out and mounted his own horse in a stunned silence. Then, as they rode out past the sentries, his mind began to work again. This was an angle he hadn't figured on, but it all fitted perfectly.

In fact, Nels saw the one way in which the steal could have been worked so successfully. He turned to McGahan.

"Do you think I'd be such a fool, if I was guilty, Sheriff?" Nels demanded. "And after being able to fool you last night, would I, now?"

McGahan shook his head unhappily.

"I'll admit it sounds fishy to me, Nels," he said. "But I'm not a jury. I just have to do what I'm hired for, like it or not."

"Sure, I know that. But I'm being made a fool of, and so are you. Wouldn't you rather solve this and really get the crooks that are responsible?"

"Sure I would. But how am I going to do it?"

"Well, I can't see that there's so much rush about takin' me to the lock-up. If you'll find some place out of sight back in these hills for the rest of the day, then go back to the mine soon as it gets dark, I'll show you what you need for evidence. You can keep me a prisoner until you're satisfied."

McGahan studied the proposal for a moment.

"Like I say, this sounds fishy to me," he said. "But I'll give you a chance."

There was half an hour of blackness after sunset before the moon rose. In that half hour Nels and the sheriff slipped quietly into the mining camp past the guards, who were chiefly looking for men trying to go out.

All was quiet around the foreman's house as they approached. No lights were showing. Leaving their horses, they walked forward. Now the moonlight came to aid them.

Nels went to the rock wall behind the cabin.

"Look," he said. "I saw it this mornin', but it didn't quite register then. But you can see it, all right."

The sheriff nodded. It looked as if horses had walked up to the solid rock wall and apparently right into it. Though some care had been taken to brush out prints, to the keen eyes now searching, the sign was still there to see.

They investigated, and after a moment Nels gave a low exclamation.

"Here's a door," he said. "Planks. Fitted in good and painted to look like a rock wall."

Presently Nels found a cleverly concealed catch, and the door swung open. They went inside, closed it, and looked around. No light came into this windowless place, but there was a lantern, which they lit.

It revealed a good-sized room, which had all the appearance of a blacksmith shop. There was a forge, anvil, tools, horseshoes, a crucible for melting down gold, and forms for horseshoes of various sizes. There was some gold on hand, and two golden horseshoes.

THE sheriff nodded as he looked around.

"Here's the evidence, all right, and the place where it was done," he breathed. "And only the foreman could get his hands on the gold, and handle all the other details without being caught or suspected. But even he couldn't take it through the lines, so they decided on the horseshoes. Some scheme!"

"Sure," Nels agreed. "But Buckholz was too blamed anxious to get me arrested. I knew he must have some trick here. I could smell a blacksmith shop somewhere around, but couldn't figure it out."

"If you make a wrong move, either one of you, I'll kill you!" Buckholz's voice came from an unsuspected small side door. "I seem to have made the mistake of underestimating you, Nels, but I won't make it a second time. Keep your hands up, both of you, and move across and face that wall there!"

Under the menace of the drawn revolver which Buckholz held, Nels and the sheriff obeyed. Buckholz's eyes gleamed like a cat's.

"I knew you were dangerous when you came up here today, Nels," he went on. "And I thought I'd scotched you, but you had to snoop. And that was too bad for you,Sheriff. This is too big a game to be spoiled now.I'll take you both out later. When you're found on the road, it'll look as if Nels tried to escape and was killed, but he managed to get

"I'm Cuttin' Off All the Old Ties—an' If Yuh Stand in My Way, I Got to Kill Yuh!"

DAN DRAKE had just risked his life to rescue Big Bill Keefer from a prison cell—and now Keefer was towering over him threateningly, aiming a six-gun at him. The treachery made Drake's blood boil—but he had no chance to settle the issue, for Keefer shot him then and there, and left him for dead.

But Drake recovered—and he didn't immediately set out on the vengeance trail, as many another man would do. For Drake had had an important purpose in freeing Big Bill—and there was still plenty of unfinished business for him to clear up in THE TOWN TAMERS, a novelet by Larry Harris that packs a mighty wallop. It's in our next issue—together with other exciting novelets and stories!

you too, McGahan. Too bad, but that's the way it has to be. These walls are thick and sound-proof. I'll do for you here, take you out in a wagon, covered over. I can manage that all right. Keep reaching!"

Nels obeyed, rigid. He knew that Buckholz wasn't bluffing, that the man intended to kill them in a minute. Buckholz was merely planning how to shoot each of them so that it would look right when he planted them beside the road later.

This room was a blacksmith shop. Nels' right hand, lifting upward, touched something on the wall. He felt it over, recognizing it as a heavy horseshoe. But it was nailed fast to the wall. Perhaps it was one of the golden shoes.

Nels was a blacksmith, and there was mighty power in his hands and arms. His fingers closed on the open ends of the horseshoe. Gripping the calks, he pulled steadily, the sweat starting on his face. Then Nels spun about suddenly and hurled the shoe at Buckholz.

The gun had been tilting a little higher in Buckholz' hand. He was caught off-guard. His shot whipped past Nels' ear. Then the flying horseshoe knocked the gun from the mine foreman's hand.

An instant later, Nels had him in his mighty paws.

Even then, Nels might have had a mighty fight on his hands, but the sheriff spun swiftly about, snatched up the dropped gun, and stuck it into the foreman's ribs.

"What I'd like to know is how you figured it all out and could be so sure it was him?" McGahan asked, a little later.

Nels smiled.

"It was mostly his hands," he explained. "The hands of a blacksmith, if you noticed. And I asked myself, why should he, the foreman, be doing a blacksmith's work up here, when they have a regular smith and shop? There couldn't be but one answer. Foremen of big outfits don't do work like that when others are hired to do it. Not without a reason."

"I guess you're right," McGahan agreed. "Now, if we're lucky at the other end of the Trail in Sodbuster, we might catch another thief."

But there was no luck in town. Hardenburgh's shop stood empty and deserted. So did Hardenburgh's house. Hardenburgh had left town. Probably with enough money from his end of the distributing business to make a profitable get-away.

"I'll get him," McGahan said. "He slipped up, tryin' to get you in bad, Nels. But I still don't see why he ran so quick."

Nels shrugged.

"One rat can smell another rat's odor a long way off, I guess," he said.

"Whether the sheriff caught Hardenburgh or not, was not Nels' worry. It was Hardenburgh who had been run out of the country. This meant that Nels could work without molestation. What more could a man ask for?

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Billy Bates saw the naked blade of a knife in the trader's hand

Buffalo Billy Bates battles a sinsister trader to aid his Navajo friends!

THE WATER OF DEATH

By SCOTT CARLETON

BUFFALO BILLY BATES was in familiar country again after a long pasear in the arid Southwest. The Culebra Mountains had been home to the young Indian scout, and the wild mountainous country between old Santa Fé and Taos had been his boyhood playground. A glorious playground which had been turned into a battlefield because of the evil influence of what was commonly termed "trade whisky," and which the Navajos called "fire-water."

The Great White Father in Washington had passed a wise law which prohibited the sale or possession of whisky on Government land. The blue-clad troopers of the United States Cavalry were only a threat. They were busy quelling an uprising of the warlike Apaches far to the west.

Billy Bates stood on a high rocky shelf above a broad mesa, looking down on a group of bronzed Navajo braves who were doing the dance of the harvest. The young white hunter's moccasined feet kept time to the rhythmic cadence of the booming tom-toms. He knew the Indians and all their customs, could speak their tongue, and was a master in all their sports.

Wise Serpent was the old medicine man, and he stood in the center of the group with a seven-foot rattler in his right hand. He held the big snake behind the flat ugly head, exerting a gentle pressure occasionally to make the huge diamond-back talk with the rattles. If the Great Spirit was to be molli-

fied, the Indians would be given a sign.

Two of the dancing braves moved to the outer edge of the circle and slipped into the thickets without the knowledge of the old medicine man. Wise Serpent was chanting a song, entirely occupied with the ritual of the harvest.

Billy Bates watched the stealthy pair of braves, and his tawny eyes narrowed with sudden anger. A swarthy hand reached out and passed a bottle to the truant dancers, and one of them reached for it with eagerness.

Billy Bates moved like a great tawny cat then, and with practised swiftness. In his left hand was a short chokecherry bow, and his right took a hunting arrow from the quiver slung across his broad supple back. He was adept with all Indian weapons, which he had been trained to use since early childhood.

The bowstring twanged, to send a feathered shaft over the heads of the dancers. A yell followed the musical tinkling of breaking glass as the steel-tipped arrow shattered the flask of trade whisky.

WISE SERPENT jerked up swiftly, and his wise old eyes darted instantly to the brush thicket where the young Navajo brave stared stupidly at the neck of the bottle held in his right hand. Then Wise Serpent turned his head as a man will do who has been trained to read all sign, and follows the trouble to its source.

"Chief Long Hair!" the medicine man exclaimed in the Navajo tongue, and his weathered face lighted with a smile of welcome. "Your medicine is very strong, my friend."

"I come in peace, my brothers," Billy Bates announced quietly, but his deep voice was vibrant with an anger he could not conceal. He stalked down a steep path, circled the dancers, and stood looking at the two truants with grim reproach.

A bearded white man pushed through the buck-bush. He faced Billy Bates, with a grimy hand on the pouched pistol tied low on his powerful right leg.

"Who are you that yuh dare bring the water of death to the Navajos?" the young hunter demanded of the bearded stranger. "I am Billy Bates, and I was born here near Taos among my red brothers."

"Not that it's any of your put-in, but I'm Jared Cutter," the man answered with a sneer which twisted his thick lips. "This ain't reservation, and you ain't no part of the law, Buffalo Billy!"

Wise Serpent put out a hand to restrain the young braves who were beginning to arm themselves with hunting lances, and long-bladed skinning knives. The Indians watched and waited to see what Billy Bates would do.

He was young as years are measured on the talking lances of the tribal councils, but Billy Bates was a seasoned veteran of the long trails. An even six feet tall, he had just passed his twenty-second birthday. He wore the beaded doeskin garb of the plainsman, and his chestnut-brown hair touched his wide shoulders as he moved his well-shaped head.

"There is a law," Billy Bates answered slowly. "Any man is a law-breaker who gives fire-water to our red brothers."

Cutter threw back his shaggy head and laughed uproariously. But the laughter died on his bearded lips when none joined in his mirth. Glancing around the ring of faces, Jared Cutter realized that he had made a mistake.

"So it's again the law to give a friend a drink of good whisky," he sneered, and his fingers tightened on the gun in his skin scabbard. "Mebbe yuh're goin' to do somethin' about it, Chief Long Hair, as yore Injun pards call yuh."

Tiny golden flecks began to dance in the tawny eyes of the young white hunter. His moccasined feet gripped the ground as his nostrils began to flare. Then he made a sudden dive like a swooping hawk just as Jared Cutter jerked his pistol free and trigggered a shot point-blank at the meddling white man who had caused him to lose face before the Navajos.

Billy Bates felt the flash of burning powder as the slug whistled over his head. His flat-crowned beaver hat fell to the ground, and his arms closed around the muscled frame of the larger man. He followed through and nudged viciously with his right shoulder as Cutter thudded to the ground. Buffalo Billy did not make the mistake of underestimating the strength of his burly opponent.

Bates was a trail athlete, and the bone and muscle of his stalwart body would tally a hundred and seventy-five pounds. Cutter would weigh more than two hundred, and he would not have been trading in high New Mexico unless certain that he could take care of himself in any company.

Billy Bates rolled up, but thudded to the ground hard when Cutter reached out with his right hand and gripped the young hunter's left ankle in a grip like steel. Bates kicked savagely, the blow catching Cutter in the chest. The two men scrambled to their feet facing each other, and none of the Indians made a sound except for their labored breathing which told of suppressed excitement.

A tinkle of metal told Billy Bates that he had lost his skinning knife during his fall. His tawny eyes narrowed when he saw the naked blade of another knife in the trader's right hand. Held for a ripping upthrust, it showed that Cutter was no novice at knife-fighting.

Sensing his advantage, Jared Cutter drove at Billy Bates with his blade flashing in front on him. Bates made a backward leap, but Cutter was on top of him like a timber wolf closing in for the kill. Wise Serpent forgot himself and muttered the mourning cry of the Navajos as the gleaming blade bore down on the young white hunter.

"Ah-eeh!"

IN THAT instant in which Jared Cutter made his lunging attack Billy Bates heard the involuntary cry. The young hunter went to his left knee and surged forward. Cutter's knife flashed down as his muscled body drove in and down to finish off the brash intruder who threatened to upset his carefully laid plans.

Buffalo Billy slapped the knife away with his left hand, and the razor-honed blade ripped his hunting shirt from waistband to armpit. Then Billy gripped that grimy wrist with his right hand and applied an elbow lock which he had learned from the Comanches down in Texas.

He threw himself forward and down while lunging up with the irresistible power of his legs. Something snapped like a brittle twig, and a frenzied scream of agony burst from Cutter's writhing lips.

Billy Bates held his grip as he looped over in a roll which brought him to his knees. His knuckles thudded solidly against Jared Cutter's whiskered chin and almost tore the trader's head from his square shoulders.

Cutter went limp as Bates released his hold and pushed up to his feet, his hunting shirt ripped apart to show firm flesh and hard muscle which might have been chiseled from white marble. And to counteract the involuntary cry of mourning uttered by Wise Serpent, Billy Bates threw back his head and screamed the triumphant cry of the victorious Comanches.

"Yipee-e-e-e-e!"

The ringing cry restored the young hunter to normal, and he turned to the circle of braves with a shamed smile on his bronzed face. His breathing was even as he addressed the old medicine man.

"You will tell your young braves, Wise Serpent," he said in the Navajo tongue, "that the fire-water which they were about to drink is poison to the red man. It is the—water of death!"

Billy Bates did not explain that the whisky was distilled in old copper kettles by Cutter and his men, or that it contained poisonous oils because of the careless and hasty process of its manufacture. Trade whisky also contained large amounts of cut plug tobacco mixed with cayenne pepper.

Perhaps, he thought, he could demonstrate the effects to their primitive minds.

Wise Serpent turned and stared sternly at the young brave who had held the broken flask in his hand.

"You have heard the words of our white brother, Chief Long Hair. What do you say now, Gray Wolf?"

Gray Wolf sighed, glanced at Billy Bates, and humbly bowed his head.

"You have always spoken with a single tongue, Chief Long Hair," he murmured. "The Evil Spirit within me wanted strong drink which is not good for Navajo."

Billy Bates smiled infectiously and offered his right hand. Gray Wolf gripped hard. Then he saw the knife of Jared Cutter on the ground. He scooped it up and started for the unconscious man, but Billy Bates barred his path.

"The white man does not kill a helpless foe, and he does not take scalps," he said gravely. "Tell me, Gray Wolf—were you trading with the evil white man, Jared Cutter?"

"Trade blankets and silver jewelry," Gray Wolf admitted grudgingly. "For fifty dollars, and a gallon of trade whisky."

"Great White Father say trade whisky is not good for red brother," Billy Bates reminded slowly. "I come from Santa Fé, my brothers. Indians there trade with white men they do not know, and many of them become sick. While they are unconscious, someone steals their money and their trade goods. They get the big sickness in the stomach, and their families have no food to eat."

"Your medicine is strong, my brother," Wise Serpent said solemnly. "The buffalo are all gone, and the Navajos need meat. Your medicine may help red brother?"

Billy Bates noticed the gaunted ribs of the dancers more closely. He knew that a great drought had swept the mountain country, and that game was scarce.

"You are mighty hunter, Chief Long Hair," Wise Serpent said pleadingly. "Will you lead us in the hunt?"

"Guard the white man well," Billy Bates answered gruffly, as he turned abruptly. "I will return at once with food!"

* * * * *

BUFFALO BILLY BATES had been up before the sun, and had shot a great mountain sheep on a pinnacle of the Culebras. He had left his Morgan horse and his pinto stallion down in a grassy pocket where the 'squite beans were plentiful, and the dead ram was hogtied, with the four feet crossed.

One slug from his long barreled Sharps rifle had brought down the game, and no time had been lost, for his red brothers were hungry. Bates tied the ram on the pinto, mounted his deep-chested bay, and rode back to the mesa. As he swung down to the ground near the ceremonial place, he heard the low murmur of voices, and paused to listen.

"My medicine heap strong," a white man's voice declared boastfully.

Billy Bates crept forward. Jared Cutter had recovered his senses, and was talking to the Navajos. He also knew the Navajo tongue.

"You give fire-water to young braves," the old medicine man accused sternly. "When Indian drink, he get very sick!"

Billy Bates frowned when Jared Cutter laughed loudly. Cutter was in the center of a circle of braves, and he reached back into a thicket and produced another flask.

"My medicine heap strong," he repeated and, pulling the cork from the bottle with his teeth, he tilted back the flask and drank heartily.

Gray Wolf leaned forward, wetting his lips with his tongue. Cutter smiled and offered the flask to the young brave.

"Drink hearty, my red brother," the trader said jovially. "There's plenty more where that came from."

Gray Wolf reached out a hesitant hand, but the old medicine man struck at the trader with the great rattlesnake. Then there was a rush of moccasined feet across the clearing, and Billy Bates slapped the flask of whisky from Cutter's outstretched hand.

Bates crouched toward Cutter, his hunting knife in his right hand. Wise Serpent thrust the enraged rattler at Cutter who retreated to the edge of the clearing with his right arm hanging limply at his side.

"Go, and do not return to the tribes of the Navajos," Billy Bates told Cutter, as he glanced at the old medicine man. "Or El Cascabel will make a strong medicine, and you will die of the poison!"

"Chief Long Hair has spoken," Wise Serpent said grimly, and completed Cutter's rout when he pushed the huge snake toward the fearful trader.

Cutter retreated hasily, and Billy Bates waited until the trader was out of sight. Even with a broken arm, Cutter would be dangerous, and he doubtless had a well-organized gang to help his nefarious trading with the simple Indians.

Gray Wolf watched resentfully, and Billy Bates knew that the young brave was consumed with a thirst for the fire-water. The young white hunter went back to his pinto and took down the slain ram. Throwing the carcass over one shoulder he strode through the brush and back to the ceremonial ground.

The Indians greeted the sight of fresh meat with low murmurs of approval, but Gray Wolf scowled at Billy Bates.

"We shall feast, my brothers," Billy Bates told the Navajos, and threw the ram at the feet of Gray Wolf.

The young brave grunted and stared at Bates. Wise Serpent said the squaws would prepare the meat, and sent another brave down to the Indian camp with the ram. Billy Bates smiled at Gray Wolf, stepped forward, and reached into a nest of brush.

Gray Wolf widened his eyes as Billy Bates stepped back with another whisky flask in his right hand.

"Me want fire-water," Gray Wolf snarled, as he reached for the flat bottle.

Billy Bates shook his head and backed a step away. He pointed to a wriggling worm-like insect—the poisonous centipede which lives in rotting wood and under shelving rocks. Gray Wolf watched sullenly as Bates pulled the cork from the bottle with his strong white teeth. The Navajo braves gathered around to watch Buffalo Billy make his medicine.

The centipede was not deadly, but if it crawled across a man and was disturbed or frightened, all the tiny feet would sink instantly into the victim's flesh. In a day or two the flesh would rot around the tiny punctures, causing a grievous sore.

Billy Bates told Wise Serpent to take a branch and brush some cholla cactus to make a small spiny fence around the wriggling centipede. Then the young white hunter stepped forward and poured a few drops of the whisky on the centipede. He knew that any whisky would produce the same effect. The test had often been used by temperance crusaders, to demonstrate the point they wished to make.

GRAY WOLF watched in sullen silence. He licked his lips with a dry tongue as he leaned closer to watch. The centipede struggled furiously for a moment, and then its movements became perceptibly slower. Finally it straightened out convulsively and flipped over on its back with all its poisonous feet in the air.

"Your medicine is strong, Chief Long Hair," the old medicine man said gravely. "The centipede is dead!"

"Not my medicine," Billy Bates corrected gravely. "This is the water of death, and it was made by the evil white man, Jared Cutter."

He upturned the flask and emptied it on the ground. Gray Wolf could not repress a shudder.

"Do not drink the fire-water, my brothers," Billy Bates said quietly, and then drums began to boom softly from down in the valley. "The squaws call you to the feast," interpreted the message of the tom-toms.

Striding into the brush, he mounted his bay horse.

Gray Wolf walked to the brush patch where Jared Cutter had hidden his whisky. The young brave's face expressed his disappointment when he found the cache empty. The old medicine man sent his braves to the valley, then followed Billy Bates to the pocket where the pinto stallion was grazing.

"I do not understand, Chief Long Hair,"

Wise Serpent told the white hunter. "The evil trader drank of the whisky and he was unharmed. Yet, the same whisky killed the centipede."

"Fire-water is bad for my red brothers," Billy Bates said solemnly. He could not explain to Wise Serpent that Jared Cutter drank every day, but that the Indians were temperate of necessity, and would be made ill by drinking, even if the whisky had been aged and properly distilled.

"Now I ride to see an honest trader who will give you meat and food for your blankets and jewelry," he told Wise Serpent. "He is an honest man, and the Indian agent knows him well. I will return by sundown of tomorrow. . . ."

Twilight was painting the high desert with pastel shades of lavender and mauve when Billy Bates rode into the Indian camp of the Navajos on the following day. He was accompanied by a tall white man with the snows of many winters reflected in his long white hair—John Bowen, who before now had traded with the Navajos.

The two white men left their horses near an ocotillo corral, and walked toward the fires.

The Navajos were gathered in a circle, sitting cross-legged about the cooking fires where the squaws had prepared the evening meal. But the Indians were not alone, and Billy Bates tightened his firm lips when he saw a burly white man sitting on a blanket, with stacks of silver money piled in front of him.

Behind the white man were piles of Indian blankets and silver jewelry cunningly embellished with turquoise matrix. The Navajos were master silversmiths, and had evidently done some trading with the big stranger.

Three other white men, who plainly had been drinking, sat behind the trader with heavy rifles across their knees, and pistols at their belts. The three turned their rifles on Billy Bates and his companion.

"Elevate, you and yore pard!" the big man ordered Billy Bates, and his pistol punctuated his command. "We've heard about you and yore high-handed ways, but I'm different from Jared Cutter!"

"Where is Wise Serpent, my brother?" Billy Bates asked quietly, but his deep voice was stern.

"Yeah, where is the medicine man?" the strange trader who menaced Billy repeated, and glanced around the clearing. There was something vaguely familiar about the man's face, and Billy Bates was trying to remember where he had seen him.

The fellow jerked up his head when the whirring rattles of a snake began to talk from the edge of the brush near the outer circle of the Navajos. Then Wise Serpent stalked into the clearing with exaggerated dignity, and Billy Bates felt his heart begin to beat faster. Had Wise Serpent been drinking? The old medicine man stopped weaving when he saw Bates, and came straight to the young white hunter.

"Good feast, Chief Long Hair," Wise Serpent began, and his left eyelid lowered slightly. "We trade some while awaiting our brother." Then he looked at John Bowen. "How, Snow Head," he greeted the old trader.

THE white-haired man with Billy Bates smiled and greeted the old medicine man in the Navajo tongue. He ran the trading post at Caliente on the Little Pecos River, and Billy Bates explained this to Wise Serpent while the other Indians listened in silence.

"I give you cattle, provisions, and money for your trade stuff," John Bowen offered.

The strange trader interrupted him with an oath.

"Not today yuh won't, Snow Head," he contradicted Bowen in English, but calling the old trader by the name Wise Serpent had used. "The Navajos can buy their provisions with the money I give them, and they won't be cheated thataway. I'm on to you tradin' post jaspers!"

Billy Bates was studying the faces of the three ruffians sitting behind their leader. He recognized them as the type of renegade white man the Indian agents were trying to drive away from Government reservations. Liquor was forbidden on Government land, and the Indians were peaceful until they drank the white man's fire-water.

The leader stretched to his feet and shook his wide, heavy shoulders. His brutal face bore the scars of many battles, and he towered two inches above six feet when he stood erect. He pointed his rifle at Billy Bates as he introduced himself with arrogant boastfulness.

"I'm Bide Cutter from down Louisiana way, and I don't like the way yuh wear yore hair, Billy Boy. Yuh whipped my brother Jared on a sneak, but yuh can't whip me! Can he, boys?"

"No!" the three white men roared in unison, and even some of the young Indians joined in the denial.

Now Billy Bates knew why the trader's bestial face seemed familiar to him. The man was Jared Cutter's brother. Bide was taller and heavier than his brother, and confident of his fighting ability. It also was evident that he was going to force the issue.

"Shed that skin shirt, Billy Boy!" Bide Cutter demanded hoarsely. "I'm goin' to beat yuh to death with my hands, and break both yore spindlin' arms. Old Snow Head can watch, and then he can ride on about his business while me and my pards finish tradin' with our noble red brothers!"

Billy Bates studied the big man, but though he felt no fear he hesitated.

"He has spoken, Chief Long Hair," Wise Serpent called from the opposite side of the circle. "My young braves have their lances and rifles, and the fight will be a fair one. We will trade with the winner, and your medicine was strong yesterday!"

Billy Bates smiled coldly and skinned out of his hunting shirt. Wise Serpent had given him a message which Bide Cutter could not interpret. A murmur of admiration whispered from the lips of the Navajos as the lithe muscles rippled under the young white hunter's smooth skin. Chief Long Hair was a mighty warrior.

Their praise was louder when Bide Cutter shucked his shirt and stood naked from the waist up. Cutter's huge muscles bulged large in the twilight, and under the dancing light from the cooking fires. Cutter scowled at the Indians whose rifles were carelessly covering his three companions.

"Bring it to me, Long Hair," he said gruffly. "No holts barred, and I aim to bust yore scrawny neck!"

Billy Bates smiled as he took stock of his foe. Bide Cutter would weigh perhaps two hundred and ten pounds—thirty-five more than Billy Bates himself. What Cutter lacked in speed would be made up for by the tremendous strength of his bulging muscles.

Bates knew, however, that he would lose caste if he refused the challenge, and he reminded himself proudly that he had never run from a fight in his adventurous life. If he could defeat Bide Cutter he would rid New Mexico of four renegades who were bringing sickness and ruin to the Indians.

Billy Bates stepped to the center of the circle, facing Bide Cutter in a crouch. The big man made a tremendous leap into the air, cracking the heels of his boots together three times before his feet touched the ground. Then he circled Billy Bates, and drove in, with both huge fists flailing.

Bates ducked under the swinging arms, stepped back, then drove forward to send stinging lefts and rights to the big beefy face above him. One of Cutter's eyes began to puff up, and he rushed his lighter opponent with his head drawn down between his thick massive shoulders.

BUFFALO BILLY made a sudden dive, clutching Cutter's thick ankles with his strong brown fingers. He jerked the big man heavily to the ground, rolled over and up, and was on Bide Cutter's broad back.

Cutter pulled his head down between his shoulders like a great turtle, and Billy Bates struck hard with the edge of his right hand at the base of the brain. Cutter went limp, then rolled swiftly. His powerful legs caught Bates around the middle and closed in a viselike lock.

Billy Bates grunted and tried desperately to turn, but those powerful legs tightened around his lean body like steel bands. Cutter reached down with both hands for his antagonist's throat and, for the second time, the mourning cry whispered from the lips of the old medicine man.

Billy Bates heard that cry as his breath began to leave him. He threw himself to the left, striking out with his right hand as his body twisted. The hardened edge of his hand struck Bide Cutter on the throat, and he felt those terrible legs loosen a trifle. Once again he struck the man's Adam's apple with the edge of his hand, and as Cutter began to cough with distress, Billy kicked savagely and rolled free.

He threw himself on Bide Cutter, slugging solidly with rights and lefts, to hammer Cutter's brutal face into a bleeding pulp. Then Bates sank his powerful fingers in his enemy's throat and tightened the writhing muscles in his shoulders and arms.

One of the white men raised the pistol in his right hand as Cutter's tongue began to protrude from his thick ugly lips.

"Unclutch him or I'll put a slug in yore carcass, Bates!" he snarled hoarsely. "Turn Bide loose, or I'll shoot!"

"Do not shoot," the voice of Wise Serpent warned quietly, speaking English now. "Or all your men will die!"

The renegade glanced at the circle of Navajos and lowered his gun. Seven rifles were pointing at him and his two companions. The old medicine man gave Billy Bates the go-ahead.

"Your medicine is strong, Chief Long Hair. The Happy Hunting Ground is near for man who talk too much with his mouth!"

Billy Bates had his eyes closed. The great rippling muscles in his back and shoulders were bunched for one last crushing effort.

Then he remembered the things he had learned from Buffalo Bill Cody, whom the Indians called "Pa-he-haska." Colonel Cody would kill where a killing was necessary to save human life, but the great Indian scout never took human life wantonly.

Bide Cutter was almost unconscious, and completely helpless. His thick tongue was protruding from between his puffy lips, when Billy Bates opened his tawny eyes.

Slowly his muscles relaxed and he loosened his clutching fingers. Rising slowly, he stepped away from the motionless man, bowed to Wise Serpent and his warriors, and turned to the three scowling white men.

"You one-trip traders lose," he said calmly, but his deep voice was vibrant with the pride of victory. "Take Bide Cutter and ride away, and don't ever come back!"

"I'll just give Bide a drop of somethin' to bring back his strength," the sullen renegade muttered.

He reached to the blankets behind him, fumbled for a bottle, but Billy Bates struck the flask from his hand.

"His throat is bad enough," he said sternly. "In his condition, that trade whisky would kill him." He turned to Wise Serpent. "Have one of the squaws bring some cold water," he requested quietly.

The old medicine man spoke to a squaw in his native tongue. Billy Bates took the gourd filled with water, sprinkled a few drops on Bide Cutter's swollen tongue, and emptied the rest on the beaten man's face.

Bide Cutter gasped, but drew his tongue back into his mouth. Then he sat up slowly and peered at Billy Bates.

"Whisky!" Cutter croaked hoarsely. "Gimme a drink, Blandon!"

The man named Blandon looked at Billy Bates and slowly shook his head. Cutter gestured impatiently for the flask of whisky which had fallen to the pile of woven blankets.

"Gimme that fire-water!" Cutter demanded hoarsely. "I helped make it—and I need a slug to brace me!"

CUTTER jerked his head up when the warning whir of a rattlesnake sounded just to the left. He stared at Wise Serpent as the old medicine man stalked closer with the big snake in his right hand, held close to the flat ugly head.

"Take him away!" Cutter screamed. "We'll ride out and quit the country for good!"

"Your medicine is strong, but it is evil," the old medicine man said quietly. "Chief Long Hair showed Navajos."

Bide Cutter watched with his eyes bulging as Wise Serpent reached down with his left hand and picked up the whisky flask. Then the medicine man handed the bottle to Billy Bates.

"Like yesterday," Wise Serpent declared sternly. "Give El Cascabel a drink!"

Billy Bates felt his heart quicken. He could see Gray Wolf watching intently. Bates drew the cork with his teeth, and Wise Serpent lowered the snake to the ground where he held it firmly with a long forked stick.

"Make medicine!" he commanded.

Billy Bates shuddered as he stepped closer. Then he poured some of the fiery trade whisky on the big snake's head. The writhing reptile was rattling furiously, and Billy Bates had no way of knowing whether or not the medicine man had removed the fangs and poison sac.

Some of the spilling whisky spurted into the Snake's gaping jaws, and the rattler tried to coil around the forked stick which held it a prisoner. Its struggles became weaker, and the old medicine man withdrew his pronged stick.

The rattler shuddered and uncoiled like a worn-out rope. Gray Wolf shuddered and moaned softly. Billy Bates turned slowly and pointing to the darkness out beyond the circle of fires. He spoke sternly to Bide Cutter and the trader's companions.

"Ride on out and make tracks goin' away, Cutter," he said, and his deep voice held a warning chill. "If I hear of yuh tradin' with the Indians, I'll notify the soldiers!"

Bide Cutter made no attempt to gather up the blankets and silver jewelry. Blandon had picked up the money, and the four white men walked slowly into the darkness to their horses, guarded by an escort of young braves.

Billy Bates turned to Wise Serpent and indicated John Bowen with a thrust of his chin.

"Snow Head will give the Navajos meat and food for blankets and jewelry," he said with a smile. "Even now his men are bringing cattle and grain to trade with your people!"

Wise Serpent nodded and pointed to the dead rattlesnake. His medicine was strong, but he made no explanation. The object lesson would help restrain his young braves when they thirsted for the white man's fire-water.

"Me your friend, Chief Long Hair," Gray Wolf said earnestly, and gripped Billy Bates by the hand.

Billy Bates pointed to the dead snake, and kicked the empty flask with the toe of his moccasin.

"Bad medicine," he told Gray Wolf. "Trade whisky is the water of death!"

Backache, Leg Pains May Be Danger Sign

Of Tired Kidneys

If backache and leg pains are making you miserable, don't just complain and do nothing about them. Nature may be warning you that your kidneys need attention.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking excess acids and poisonous waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters don't work well, poisonous waste matter stays in the blood. These poisons may start nagging backaches, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from the blood. Get Doan's Pills. (Adv.)

JACKASS JUSTICE

By TOM GUNN

When trouble stalks Indian County in the wake of a mule ranch project, Sheriff Blue Steele and Deputy Shorty Watts prove they can be mighty stubborn in upholding the law!

CHAPTER I

The Settler

NEW settlers were seldom welcomed in Painted Post. The few spreads that grazed the desert range wanted no new brands. It was not a matter of greed, but of grim survival. Grass was plentiful but water was "few and far between" in Indian County. Men who dominated the water would not relinquish their hold without a fight.

Most of the trouble in Arizona Territory, as Sheriff Blue Steele once remarked, was caused by water—and whisky. Not enough of one, too much of the other.

But all was not villainy and violence, greed and gun play. There were unsung deeds of kindness, generosity and noble impulse. These shining virtues were displayed at their best when Joe Stroud and his fourteen-year-old son settled in Steele's border-bounded bailiwick.

Sheriff Blue Steele

The coming of the Strouds was an outgrowth of the outlaw career of one "Apache" Johnson, rustler and all-around badman.

Wandering westward out of Missouri, the Strouds had been waylaid and robbed by Apache and his gang. Apache had kidnaped the father in order to rob him of assets banked with Wells Fargo.

Stroud's boy, "Stubby," had been left to stray and perish on the desert. But Steele had found Stubby and with the boy's help had located and rescued Stroud, killed Apache Johnson, and broken up his gang.

But there had been a suspenseful interval in which Stubby Stroud had been the Sheriff's ward. And in that time a devotion had grown between them.

So Joe Stroud, after his rescue, had been warmly received in Painted Post. Even then, he had intended only to tarry a while, to recover from the ordeal he had suffered at the outlaws' hands.

Perhaps he would have drifted on to a greener land, more like his native Ozarks, had it not been for Stubby's clinging admiration for Sheriff "Blue" Steele. That and a chance remark made by Stroud one evening at Thimble Jack's Place.

"The comin' need in this country is for bigger and better mules," Stroud had said. "Missouri mules."

Judge John Bertram, Indian County's leading citizen and owner of the big T Bar T, felt friendly to the big, soft-spoken Stroud. Besides, Stroud played a good hand of pinochle. And to the Judge's notion, what the country needed was more and better pinochle players.

"Ever raise mules, Joe?" he had asked.

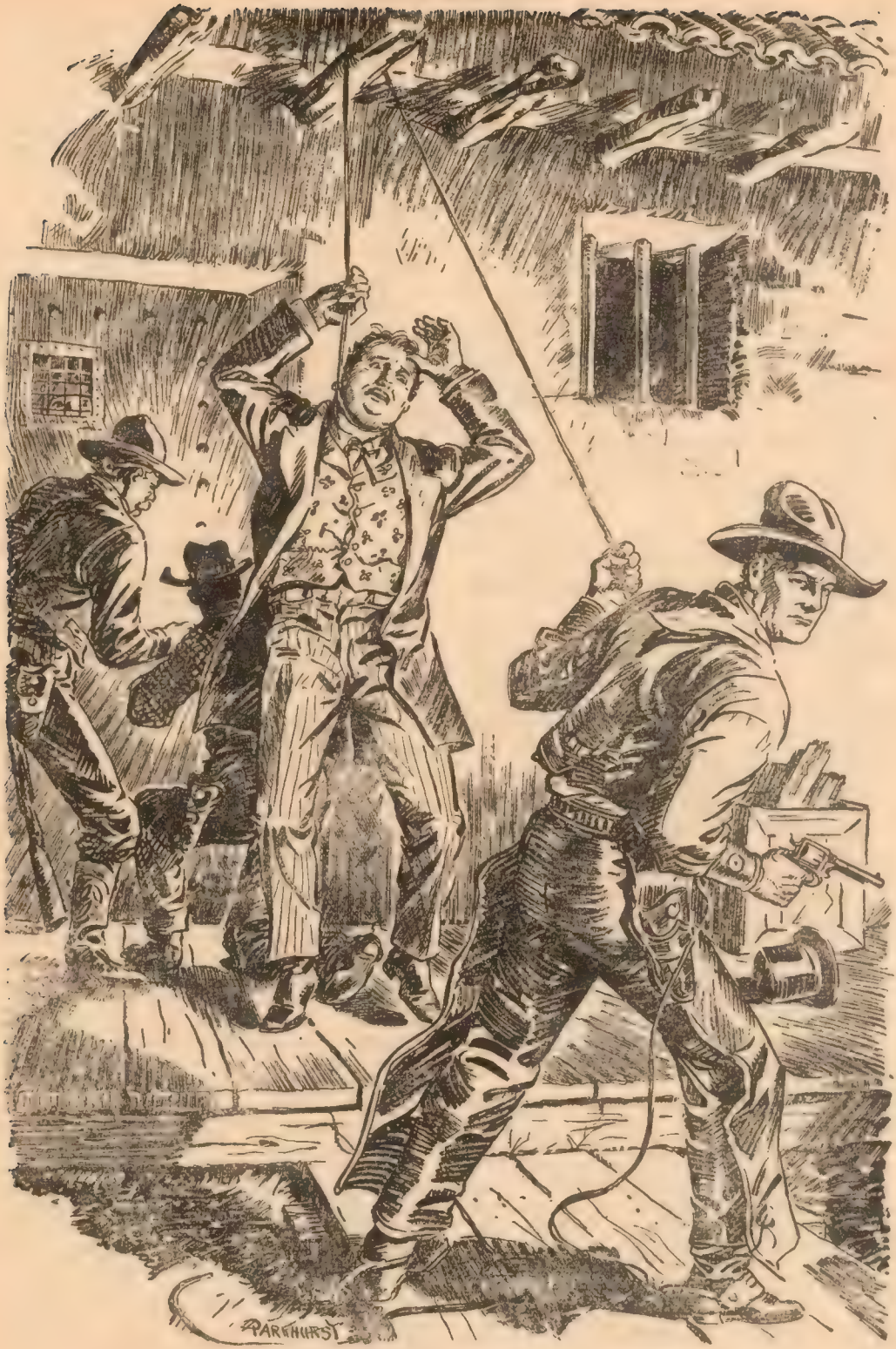
"Couldn't raise much else in the parts where I lived. Still own about the best jack in Pike County."

THE white-haired, ruddy-faced Bertram had fingered a jutting eyebrow.

"What does it take to raise mules?"

"Well-selected brood mares, grass, water

A COMPLETE PAINTED POST NOVELET



The rasp of hemp brought a yammer for help from Frye

and experience," Stroud had said. "Plus some fenced pasture."

The Judge's tufted eyebrows, which were a barometer of his feelings, had lowered almost belligerently.

"Fencin' ain't popular in an open range country such as this," he had declared with all the prejudice of a frontier rancher.

That had been his curt way of dismissing whatever thought had come to his mind at the mention of mules. But Steele had heard.

The Sheriff never talked much. But when he did speak, his talk was to the point. Men listened. Lean and tanned and serious, with wide-spaced gray eyes in a rugged face, the Sheriff was the Southwest's best-known lawman. His exploits had become legend, and the twin Colts holstered to his single buscadero belt had made exciting Arizona history.

Steele had sauntered to the table where Judge Bertram and Stroud sat with Doc Crabtree who had tended the exhausted and battered Missourian.

"A mule ranch could end yore biggest trouble, Judge," the Sheriff had said, flinging a long leg over the back of a chair.

Bertram searched Steele's face, suspecting a joke.

"What in thunderation yuh drivin' at?" he had rumbled.

"Squaw Creek is yore trouble boundary."

There was no joke about that. Squaw Creek was the line that divided T Bar T range from the adjoining Rancho Robles. A feud had smoldered between the two outfits since the old days, when Don Pete Robles had been a kingpin rustler. Even since then Robles riders had run a loose iron along Squaw Creek, where the two brands mingled. Bertram was convinced that many of his T Bar T calves became Robles beef, but never had been quite able to prove it.

"The Squaw Creek bottoms," Steele had gone on, "would make good mule land."

Doc Crabtree's eyes flashed behind his thick specs with quick comprehension.

"I get it!" he had exclaimed. "A fenced-in strip along the creek would keep T Bar T cattle in and Robles rawhiders out! Sounds to me like the Sheriff's got a good idea there, John!"

Steele lowered his leg from the chair back and sat down.

"A few wing dams and highline ditches would put flood waters from the creek onto those long, flat benches and furnish all-year grass. Windmill 'tanques' would give water through the dry season. There's cedar and juniper fence posts for the cuttin' up along the rim-rock. It'd be money in yore pocket, Judge, to help Stroud to raise Missouri mules here in Arizona. And it'd contribute plenty to the peace of Indian County."

Judge Bertram had been impressed. Stroud had been interested. And Doc Crabtree enthusiastic.

Then "Magpie" Stevens, the gap-toothed, gabby old stage driver had chipped in.

"There's a waitin' market for mules in this country, all right enough. These little red Mexican mules are all right as pack critters. But not big enough for work stock. Wish I had a string of Missouri mules my own self."

The upshot had been that Stroud made a partnership agreement with Judge Bertram, whereby T Bar T was to furnish a strip of land and Stroud was to send for that prized sire and contribute his own labor.

The brand they devised for registry was a Lazy S, which soon became known as the Snaketrack brand. The name was descriptive for the budding mule ranch, which followed the twisty course of Squaw Creek at its source, Box L Springs to the Caliente River.

"The longest, narrowest ranch in Arizona," Stroud claimed. "Also an experiment that'll prove Arizona can grow anything bigger and better that grows anywhere else."

But the person more pleased than anyone else at the arrangement was Stroud's son. Stubby, Steele's fond admirer, became the Sheriff's shadow.

He even strived, with comical results, to act and look like Painted Post's celebrated lawman.

"I declare that boy is like a piece of tinfoil yuh'd press onto a silver dollar," vowed Stroud.

THE Robles outfit, however, did not take kindly to the project. A knot of critical riders paid Stroud a visit the day he brought his Missouri jack down from Cottonwood on the railroad.

"Why, he ain't nothin' but a overgrowed jackass!" a puncher named Griswold scoffed. "Otherwise no different than any wild desert burro!"

"That difference," Stroud told him, "is the result of long selective breedin'."

"Yeah? Reckon he's sort of a valuable critter, huh?" Griswold eyed the smoky-black, pale-muzzled jack scornfully.

Stroud's reply surprised him.

"I've turned down an offer of fifteen hundred."

"Fifteen hundred for a jackass!" cried Griswold. He shot a significant glance at his companions. "Hear that, boys? About the most valuable hunk of livestock I ever seen! Huh, better keep a eye on him, mister! Don't let that critter stray!"

"Smoky'll have his own stockade, soon as I can build one," Stroud said. "And that stockade won't be far off from my house. And I keep a loaded rifle behind the door."

Griswold scowled darkly.

"That's a right strong insinuation to make to a neighbor, stranger!"

"No insinuation intended," said the slow, even-tempered Stroud. "That's just information for the benefit of whoever might be interested."

The Robles outfit called Snaketrack the Jackass Ranch and referred to their unwanted neighbor as "Jackass" Stroud.

No more was seen of them after that first visit.

T Bar T punchers lent Stroud a hand in getting started. A rock-walled house grew on a live-oak bench by the creek, some dozen miles from Painted Post. At the foot of the short slope nearby, the high-sided stockade was built. Fence posts were cut and hauled and feeder ditches dug, to carry the spring flow from Squaw Creek onto pastures bounding the creek on the west.

Stroud's broad back was bent to a shovel one warm spring morning when he heard the slow approach of hoofs. He straightened and turned. Coming toward him, from across the creek, was a man wholly different than any cowpuncher he had seen, but fully as picturesque.

Astride a big gray was a thick-legged man in a frock coat, rolled collar and flowery cravat, topped by a stovepipe hat. He had a fat mottled face and, sagging jowls, and heavy lids veiled his pale, restless eyes, which took in everything as he reined to a halt.

He propped a pair of pinch-nose glasses, suspended on a black ribbon, onto his nose and then he drew a document from a breast pocket.

" 'Greetings from the People of the County of Los Pasos to one Joseph Stroud, Esquire' " he read ponderously.

"That's me," admitted Stroud, leaning on his shovel handle. "But what for is Los Pasos County greetin' me? This here is Indian County."

"The creek is a county line as well as a property boundary."

"I know that. But I don't know who you are."

"I am J. Weatherby Frye, attorney-at-law and special counsel for the Caliente Land and Water Company of Los Pasos."

"Never heard of that, either, Lawyer Frye."

"This is a restraining order," the heavy man said, brandishing the document, "enjoining you from diverting the waters of Squaw Creek from its natural channel."

He handed the paper to Stroud who looked at it uncomprehendingly. The high-sounding legal phrases impressed Stroud, who was a simple, straightforward man.

"My use of this water don't deprive nobody else," he argued mildly.

"Nonetheless my clients insist that you

Shorty Watts

desist. Under penalty as provided by the statutes."

"What penalty?"

"Fine and seizure of all private property to the extent of declared damages, including cost of this service," Frye stated glibly. "Which is exactly fifty dollars."

"What? Then I'm in the hole fifty dollars already?"

"Correct, sir. Which will become a lien if not forthcoming on this date in cash."

"But I'm new to the laws of the Territory! Give me a chance to see Judge Bertram or somebody!"

"Ignorance of the law is no excuse," Frye said severely. "The fee is fifty dollars, now."

STROUD felt hopeless. He could defend himself from a physical danger. But like most simple men, he dreaded the law, vaguely realizing that it could be manipulated to his disadvantage. He wiped sweat from his worried brow.

Neither of them were aware of the quiet approach of an easy-gaited horse—two horses in fact—until they pulled up.

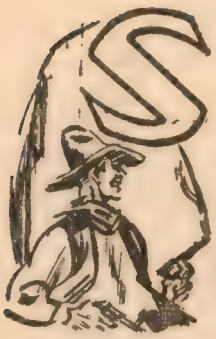
"What's up, Dad?" called Stubby Stroud from the back of his roan pony.

J. Weatherby Frye twisted around in saddle. With the small freckled boy was Blue Steele. The Sheriff's gray eyes, stone-hard, bored into Frye's puffy face. Then he kneed his steel-dust gelding to Stroud, who shrugged and handed him the legal-looking document.

"This lawyer party aims to collect fifty dollars from me for ridin' out from Los Pasos with this whereas-and-therefore thing," Stroud said.

CHAPTER II

Loco Weed



STEELE gave the document Stroud handed him a glance, crumpled it and dropped it into the flowing ditch. He smiled thinly as he looked at the uneasy Frye.

"Lawyers don't serve legal notices," he said. "Nobody serves Los Pasos notices in Indian County."

"What'll I do, Sheriff?" asked Stroud.

Steele's fixed smile chilled Frye.

"Pay this hombre fifty dollars," he told Stroud.

"But—but yuh let on as how it wasn't a legal notice."

"That's right, Stroud. And this isn't a legal procedure. But hand him the fifty and I'll nail him for fraud and lug him into jail, muy pronto."

"Great!" cheered Stubby. "I been waitin' to see yuh arrest somebody, Sheriff!"

J. Weatherby Frye was not so enthused at the prospect. His mottled face turned pasty.

"I am acting only for my clients!" he wheezed rapidly.

"Yore clients," Steele interrupted coldly, "exist on paper only."

"What yuh mean by that?" cried the perplexed Stroud.

"The Caliente Land and Water Company is an old scheme that some Los Pasos crooks thought up to grab water rights. A fake."

"Not so hasty, Sheriff!" Frye blustered. "Under the law, water rights are distributed. My clients obtained such rights to the normal flow of Squaw Creek."

"Squaw Creek hasn't got any normal flow," Steele said curtly. "It floods in the spring, goes dry in the summer."

"Nothin' seems to be normal in this country," sighed Stroud. "Not even its inhabitants. Now let me get this straight, Sheriff. This hornswogglin' lawyer tried to do me out of fifty dollars—is that right?"

"And bluff yuh out of usin' Squaw Creek," Steele said.

"Then he's a dirty crook?"

"Plenty."

"Here's where one dirty crook gets cleaned up," Stroud decided deliberately.

Dropping the shovel, he made at Frye. The lawyer spurred. But he wasn't quick enough. Stroud got him by a thick leg and jerked him off of his horse. He carried the struggling protesting man to the ditch and hurled him in.

J. Weatherby Frye floundered, splashed and crawled out onto the muddy bank, minus dignity and his stovepipe hat. He saw it floating down the lazy current and sloshed after it. He had it almost in reach when a Colt roared.

He craned around at Steele. He had heard of that lightning draw. He saw the Sheriff starting a cigarette. A curl of gunsmoke lifted from his right-hand holster.

Then he saw his stovepipe hat slowly sinking, a slug hole through it.

Panic seized Frye. He scuttled to his horse, clambered on and ribbed it into a run across the creek and into a gap in the hills that led toward the Robles home spread.

"Ain't yuh goin' to arrest him, Sheriff?" Stubby Stroud piped disappointedly.

Steele's face was grim as he licked his cigarette shut. He knew that more would be heard from the sly shyster and the Los Pasos schemers behind him.

"Reckon I was wrong," he mused somberly, "when I figgered that this mule ranch would bring peace to Painted Post."

As spring ripened into a hot, dry Arizona summer, "Jackass" Stroud's Snaketrack Ranch bore the marks of well-planned labor. The benches flooded by diversion ditches were deep with grass. Newly fenced, they had become pastures where a growing herd of brood mares grazed.

Stroud had combed the Border country for this selected breeding stock, sound and heavy-boned animals that would give size and endurance to mule colts.

He had dug a shallow well on the creek bottoms by the house and stockade and erected a windmill that gave ample water supply until the rains came again.

Stubby preferred the company of Steele to ranch work, but the Sheriff had persuaded him to help his hard-working dad and stay close to the ranch when Stroud was on his horse-buying trips. The steady activity in the bracing climate produced a rapid change in the boy, who had been undersized for his age. He sprouted fast into rawhide tallness, his freckles dimmed under a desert tan. The name of Stubby no longer fitted him.

ALREADY he had grown nearly as tall as Steele's runty, red-headed deputy, "Shorty" Watts. They rode the same stirrup lengths. It was Shorty, who had been a T Bar T puncher, who pointed out a budding danger in the irrigated pastures, and furnished Stubby with a new, distasteful chore.

"Loco weed is takin' hold purty strong, bud. Always did thrive on these creek benches. Now that they've been watered, it's growin' thick."

"What's loco weed?" asked the boy.

Shorty leaned from saddle, pulling up a

sp"Timen of the silvery-leafed, pod-bearing ground plant.

"When hosses eat it in any amount, they go loco—crazy. Git the blind staggers, lose flesh and if they get a taste for it and keep eatin' it they finally die."

"I bet Dad could cure 'em."

"Only cure is to get rid o' loco weed before it gets rid of yore Pa's hosses."

"How?"

"Like I just showed yuh. Yank it up, before it goes to seed and spreads."

"Aw, go on!" Stubby said, suspecting this to be one of Shorty's jokes. "I bet you never went around pullin' loco weed when yuh was a cowpuncher!"

"The stuff don't bother cattle. Just hosses. Yuh better get busy."

Stubby groaned.

"As if I didn't have enough work to do! I bet yuh thought up this job just to keep me from havin' any fun!"

"Mebbe," Shorty grinned. "Seen any more Robles rannies?"

"They're roundin' up along the creek but haven't shown up around here since that once when they came to see Dad."

"They drive their cattle yonder east beyond the hills when the creek dries up. My guess is they're brandin' fewer calves this year. When yore pa gets this whole stretch of creek fenced, they won't have any more T Bar T calves for their iron."

"Just my luck!" grumbled Stubby. "By the time I'm done pullin' loco weed there won't be any more rustlers left! No more excitement!"

"Don't worry, bud. Rustlers are harder to root out than loco weed," Shorty laughed as he rode on to finish his pasear along this trouble boundary.

Stubby pulled loco weed until noontime, and when he quit to get dinner there was a wilting heap of the ruinous plants outside the corral fence.

After eating and washing his few dishes, Stubby hunted a patch of shade under the live-oaks. Work didn't tempt him strongly as the blazing sun rode at zenith.

He stretched out on the ground, drowsy from the heat and a full stomach. His eyes closed. All knowledge of time was lost to him until he awakened, aroused by horse sounds on lower ground.

He sat up with a jerk. Afternoon shadows were lengthening but he had not expected his father to return until nightfall.

He got to his feet and went to the edge of the live-oak bench that commanded a view of the stockade and house. He saw no sign of his father's arrival. But he heard hoofs in rocks.

Turning toward the sound, he glimpsed a rider, just as he disappeared through a fringe of willows on the far side of the creek.

The rider was not his father. It looked like the Robles puncher, Griswold. He had not seen the man on Snaketrack's side of the creek, but he was sure from those first sounds he had heard that Griswold had been.

He hurried down to the stockade and was relieved to see Smoky, the prize jack, on his feet behind the high pole-sided enclosure. Smoky was feeding. That struck Stubby as unusual. For the animal was near the gate, at the opposite side from the feed rack.

The boy went down there. Near the gate was strewn recently uprooted loco weed.

"Get away from that!" Stubby shouted, rushing for the gate.

He scooped up a rock and flung it. Smoky flattened his ears and snorted away, a wisp of loco weed dangling from his fawn-colored muzzle.

Stubby swiftly flung the plants out of the stockade. Then he went to the pasture where he had worked that morning, and quickly saw that the loco weed heap had been disturbed.

He blazed with sudden anger.

HE WAS frightened too. Had Smoky eaten enough loco weed to bring on that incurable malady? The jack was worth more than a pasture full of brood mares. He was the keystone of success in this mule-raising enterprise. The enemies of Snaketrack had realized this and had made a cowardly attempt to destroy this irreplaceable animal.

There was something else that Stubby thought of then. The incident proved that he had been watched during his weed-pulling. Those same crafty eyes had seen him asleep in the live-oaks, had probably even witnessed his father's departure that morning.

Stubby longed for the steadying presence of the Sheriff. Even Shorty might help. But without aid or advice, Stubby had to act on his own.

The thing to do, as he saw it, was to make certain of the identity of the sneaking culprit. Quickly he caught up his buckskin pony. He didn't take time to saddle. He mounted bareback and with rope hackamore rode for the house, pausing long enough to get his single-shot .32 rimfire rifle.

The little gun was all right for small game. But it was hardly more than a toy so far as any more serious purpose was concerned. Slinging it across a shoulder, Stubby crossed the creek and followed it upstream toward the fringing willows.

He had never crossed onto Robles territory before. Both Steele and his father had sternly forbidden him to do so. But now he felt justified in going counter to their orders. He had already learned that in this raw and untamed borderland, men often were compelled to take the law into their own hands.

About two miles above the Stroud place the broad canyon forked. The lesser tributary was a wash that fed down out of the

barrier of hills to the east. In the ripening grass Stubby saw fresh hoof tracks. He followed them and soon heard cattle bawling.

He rounded a bend and all at once saw the head of the wash, where it formed a rock-walled amphitheater.

There was a haze of dust and bluish smoke, and through screening brush he saw bunched cattle, riders and a small branding fire. Beside it a man crouched with hot iron beside a roped, spotted calf.

The blind draw was a natural trap corral. The boy scanned the half-dozen or so riders. His gaze pounced on a familiar figure in leather chaps and a tall, curl-brimmed hat.

It was Griswold. And now he was sure that Griswold was the man he had seen a little while before, leaving the Snaketrack premises.

Stubby didn't know what to do next. But he learned something about the habits of range-trained cow ponies. The little buckskin under him was a gift from Judge Bertram, a part of the T Bar T cavvy. The buckskin had been trained to work cattle. Its ears pricked up and it surged forward, stubbornly fighting Stubby's tug on the bitless hackamore.

It carried him into the open, and the movement attracted Griswold. He barked something at the men around him. The man by the roped calf dropped the branding iron, loosened the roped calf, and it struggled to its feet.

The next moment, Robles riders stormed down the draw and Stubby was surrounded.

CHAPTER III

Thirty-Two Caliber

WHEN Joe Stroud returned to Snaketrack it was dark. No light welcomed him from the little rock-walled house. He unsaddled at the pasture gate and called out a greeting as he crossed to the dark, open doorway. He called out again as he entered. Silence answered.

"That young one shore turned in early," he reflected as he lighted a lamp on the kitchen table.

As the wick took hold and the light grew, he saw no sign of supper things. He stepped to the stove. It was cold.

"Hullo, son!" he called out anxiously. "Wake up! Where are yuh?"

He hurried across the room to a long open porch that formed the north side of the house. There were two high, crosslegged canvas cots there.

Both were made up, untouched.

Alarm pounded in the big man's heart. Back in the kitchen he took a lantern from a shelf and lighted it with unsteady hands and strode out with it to the stockade.

Smoky greeted him, thrusting his warm muzzle out through the gate. Stroud called again. He lifted his voice to an agonized shout.

He hurried breathlessly to the pasture, mind crowded with ugly imagining of the many ways that a youngster left alone could get himself into trouble.

He searched the pasture. All that he learned there was that the buckskin pony was missing. That was a fairly sure sign that Stubby was not on the premises.

One small hope gleamed in Stroud's worried brain. Stubby might have contrived some excuse for going to town, for seeing his friend, the Sheriff.

"Must of made up his mind sudden," Stroud thought. "Else he'd of left me a note."

Anything was better than this tormenting suspense. Stroud saddled again and rode down-creek, angled to the Caliente ford and pressed his jaded horse into an unyielding lope the rest of the way into Painted Post.

It was mid-evening when he burst into Thimble Jack's Place. Judge Bertram and Doc Crabtree were at the pinochle table. Shorty was in a chair leaning against the wall, plucking discord out of a battered guitar. There were two or three others at the bar and at the far end, apart from the others, Steele was thumbing the pages of the latest issue of the Tucson Citizen.

Shorty lowered the guitar and the chair legs banged to the floor.

"Migosh, neighbor, yuh look like yuh seen a ghost!" he blurted.

Steel looked up sharply as Stroud rushed to him.

"Where's that young one of mine?" he breathed hoarsely.

Steele shrugged one shoulder. Thimble Jack saw that something was wrong. He pushed a bottle invitingly across the bar. Stroud ignored it. Bertram laid down his cards and got up. He laid hold of Stroud's arm.

"Get hold of yoreself, Joe," he said. "Tell us what's wrong."

"Stubby! He's gone! When I pulled in at dark I couldn't find him!"

"He was home this mornin'," chirped Shorty. "I dropped in for a look-see and left him pullin' loco weed! About that loco weed, neighbor. Yuh better—"

Steele didn't waste time with talk.

"Saddle up, segundo!" he crackled. "A fresh hoss for Stroud, too!"

Bertram got his coat from the back of his chair.

"I'm in on this too!" he boomed. "Don't

worry, Joe. It mightn't be anything serious. You know how boys are, always pokin' around and gettin' into little troubles."

Shorty already was on Stroud's tired horse, making for the feed corral. Steel started outside, Stroud between him and Bertram.

"Tell us about it—everything yuh can," Steele urged as they swung up the sidewalk. "That gun of his. Was it missin', too?"

Stroud ran a hand across his brow.

"Reckon I was too muddled to look and find out," he admitted. "But he couldn't of roamed off for an evenin's hunt, if that's what yuh think. He was down to his one last load for that little thirty-two. Waitin' for Magpie to bring down more from Cottonwood. . . ."

THAT one last rimfire cartridge had been in the gun when Stubby had faced the ring of hostile-eyed Robles riders as they closed in around him.

Griswold advanced ahead of the others. He appeared to be foreman.

"Throw 'way that pea-shooter, kid!" Griswold ordered. He was a hard-faced man with a bullying manner and a whisky voice.

Stubby had the rifle clamped under his arm. It was aimed in Griswold's direction.

"Yuh got no call to order me!" the boy shot back.

"Yuh're trespassin'," Griswold said.

"We don't mess around on yore side of the creek," said one of the others.

"That's a lie!" flared the boy. "Griswold was there, not a half-hour back. And he come huntin' trouble. Now I'm huntin' him!"

Griswold gave a loud, jeering laugh. He sobered suddenly. Stubby had the little rifle to his shoulder.

"Drop that!" he grated. "Yuh're comin' with us!"

"Not much I ain't," challenged the boy. "Yuh're comin' with me!"

Griswold pulled rein, breathing hard. One of his men snickered.

"Go to it, Griz!" he taunted. "It's yore party!"

Griswold wore a six-gun. But he would look foolish if he drew on this spunky youngster. He would look even more foolish if he let himself be bluffed. He was angered by his own uncertainty.

He kneed his horse forward again. The boy's aim leveled.

"Don't crowd me!" he cried.

Griswold halted again. He flung a side glance at his men, all of them amused now, all of them aloof.

"We're watchin' to see who's goin' with who, Griz," one of them jibed.

"You know what it means, Kaneer, if Jackass Junior gets away from us!" blasted Griswold. "He seen you workin' on that calf!"

"And you know what it means if anybody handles that brat rough," Kaneer retorted. "It means he'd have Blue Steele on his neck for keeps!"

"We're in our lawful rights to lug him into Los Pasos, and that's what we're doin'!" vowed Griswold. "It's our comeback for what happened to Frye!"

"All right—go ahead," sneered Kaneer. "What's stoppin' you?"

But even as he spoke, Kaneer shifted in saddle and whipped a gun out of holster. It jolted out three heavy reports that sent gravel whizzing around the buckskin's legs.

In a frenzy of fright the pony leaped and shied. Stubby was almost unseated on its slippery back. Fighting for balance, he dropped his aim.

That was Griswold's opportunity. He bolted in. The little rifle fired as he grabbed it.

One of the Robles riders blurted an oath and doubled forward over his saddle-horn, a hand clutching at his middle.

But Griswold did not let anything detract him. Wresting the weapon from Stubby, he flung it to the ground, then grabbed the rope hackamore.

"Sufferin' sidewinders!" Kaneer said in an awed voice. "Layton's shot!"

Stubby was startled out of further resistance as he saw blood dribble over the wounded man's fingers.

"It was an accident!" he cried shrilly.

"Accident, my foot!" accused Griswold. "Here's witnesses aplenty to prove you done it, kid!" Then he crowed: "We've got Jackass Stroud where we want him now, boys! His kid rampaged over here and gunned us! Frye will be plumb happy to cinch the case!"

Kaneer was at Layton's side, supporting him with an arm.

"He's bad hit, Griz," he said.

"I—I'm done for!" Layton gasped. "Unless somebody rides like blazus for Painted Post and Doc Crabtree!"

"We got our own hides to think of," Griswold said callously. "We're headin' for Los Pasos with the kid, savvy?"

Kaneer remonstrated. But the others saw the wisdom of Griswold's plan. It meant the ruination of Stroud and his Jackass Ranch.

Kaneer turned from Layton as somebody looped a lariat over Stubby. Leading the buckskin, Griswold started. . . .

FIVE horses pounded the up-trail toward Snaketrack. Besides Steele and Shorty, Stroud and Bertram, Doc Crabtree had joined the party at the last moment.

"The young one might be hurt or snakebit," he explained.

In the cool darkness they made good time along what was now a fairly well-defined

trail. As they neared the Stroud place, Steele forged into the lead, but soon swung back with a cheery call:

"There's a light in the house!"

"Fuddle duddle!" snapped Doc Crabtree. "If that boy has turned up safe and sound, I'll teach him not to worry everybody like this again!"

"How?" asked Shorty.

Doc Crabtree patted the black satchel on his cantle.

"I've got a bottle of castor oil in here, among other things!"

Then Stroud spoke up. What he said dashed their hopes.

"Reckon I was too fuddled when I left to put out the kitchen lamp."

They pressed on in gloomy silence. They were beyond the pasture, and the squat shape of the low-roofed house grew out of the night. Steele spoke again, his voice sharp:

"There's a hoss in the dooryard!"

"Thank God, he's turned up!" Stroud breathed.

But that hope was shattered almost as quickly as the first one.

Steele, sharper-visioned than the others, called back in a flat, toneless voice:

"It's not the little buckskin."

They swarmed into the dooryard. Shorty slipped from saddle and caught up the dragging reins of the riderless animal. He ran a hand over shoulder and hip and felt the roughness of a brand.

"Migosh, a Robles hoss!" he yelped.

"Look sharp, everybody!" cautioned Steele.

Stroud went inside, his boots making a hollow sound as he crossed the kitchen to the porch beyond. He uttered a muffled exclamation.

"Sheriff, come here!" he sang out.

He hurried back inside and brought out the lamp. On one of the cots a man was stretched out. His eyes were closed and his face was drawn with suffering. A bandage was clumsily bound to his middle, one still hand lay across it. The tarp-covered blankets under him were blood-soaked.

Steele leaned over the unconscious man.

"It's a Robles hand named Layton," he said tensely.

Doc Crabtree elbowed him aside and set the black satchel on the foot of the cot. He pressed a hand to the heart, gently lifted an eyelid. Then he plunged a hand into the satchel.

"Pile pillows under his head and back!" he ordered. "He's about bled dry!" He lifted the bandage. "This is no forty-five job or the man would be dead. Mighty small bullet-hole."

"What yuh mean by that, Doc?" Stroud demanded strickenly.

"I mean this is a thirty-two gun wound if I'm any judge. Now build a fire, heat a blanket! Shorty, get his boots off! You and John rub his arms and legs. Warm him up—get what blood he has left to circulating!"

"Figger yuh can pull him through?" asked Shorty.

Doc Crabtree uncorked a pint flask and put it to Layton's lips.

"The important thing right now is to rouse him enough to talk. This man can tell us what we came here to find out, if anybody can!"

The Doc took a nip from the flask himself before he screwed the cap back on.

"Whatever happened," Steele said, "didn't happen here. The saddle on that Robles hoss is bloody."

CHAPTER IV

Death Demand

JOE STROUD was kindling a fire in the kitchen when a flush crept into Layton's blanched cheeks. His breath quickened and his pallid eyelids fluttered.

Doc Crabtree gave Steele a brisk look.

"Get set! He's coming out of it! A few words is the best we can expect, the shape he's in!"

Steele leaned close as Layton's eyelids parted a slit. They widened as he saw the grim-faced Sheriff bending over him.

"The boy, where is he?" Steele rapped out.

Layton stirred. His lips moved.

"Griz—Los Pasos—" he whispered.

The whisper faded and his eyes closed. Steele shook him lightly by a shoulder.

"Get Crabtree," Layton murmured through pain-clenched teeth.

"The Doc's here, tendin' yuh, Layton. Talk up. The Stroud boy—is he all right?"

Layton nodded almost imperceptibly. He roused himself again. He brightened beyond Doc Crabtree's expectations and started to talk, rapidly and brokenly.

"We were brandin' . . . Boy came with gun after Griz. Struggled. Gun went off, hit me. Griz and the rest took boy to Los Pasos, jail. Left me to die, cuss him. Come night I seen light—made it here. Nobody around—"

The voice trailed off thinly.

"Not boy's fault," Layton said with great effort. "But Griz and the rest—will lie. Frye'll sock him with long sentence. Might even hang if I—I'm done for. Griz hopes I—die."

Doc Crabtree gently pressed the straining, suffering man back onto the pillows.

"That's enough, cowboy. As for this Griz hombre, we'll fool him. I'm going to pull you

through. Savvy that?"

Layton tried to smile. He heaved a deep sigh. He was in a coma again.

"So the youngster went after Griswold with a gun, huh?" gabbled Shorty. "With only one load in that little popgun of his'n! Somethin' sort of serious must of happened before that! What yuh figger it was, Sheriff?"

Steele straightened and hitched up the buscadero belt. In the yellow lamplight, his face was stony-hard, like rough-hewn granite.

"We'll find that out at Los Pasos," he said ominously.

"I'm with yuh on that!" Bertram rumbled.

Stroud came in from the kitchen.

"I'm not stayin' behind!" There was a new ring in his voice.

"Which leave me here alone to rassle with the devil over this hombre!" Doc Crabtree sputtered. "But put a bucket of water on the stove before you go. Might load up the coffee pot too, Stroud. Not much help, any of you, for that matter! Go on, then! Off with you!"

They unsaddled Doc's horse, freeing it in the pasture. But they took Layton's. They crossed the creek and took the gap trail where J. Weatherby Frye had made ignominious retreat after the initial attempt to rid Squaw Creek of the fence-building settler.

Beyond the Caliente Hills the land fell away on a long, sloping plain to Los Pasos, the small, squalid town to the southeast. Los Pasos, Painted Post, and Stroud's Snaketrack formed a triangle that put the three points roughly equi-distant.

They were in enemy territory now, beyond Steele's bailiwick of authority. Los Pasos long had been a blot on the map and a threat to peace and safety of neighboring regions. The clique that ruled Los Pasos were notorious characters who headquartered at an infamous dive known as the Tecolote Club.

Toward this Steele headed. He and Shorty knew the risks involved better than their companions, knew that anyone from Painted Post was a marked man there. Their mere presence invited resentment that could flare into a fight. Their present mission would surely be resisted with force.

Steele rode wordlessly as he planned a strategy to free Stubby Stroud from the clutches of Griswold, Frye and whoever else opposed him. He called a halt when they reached a bluff where the trail dipped down to the town, which sprawled on a flat where the Caliente River formed a sandy mesquite bottom.

With the lights of the Tecolote Club blinking below them, they held hurried council, before moving in on the town.

IT WAS a busy night at the Tecolote. Every night was a busy one at the long bar and at the gambling tables. But on this night it was the behind-the-scenes activity that was important.

In a back room Griswold sat with J. Weatherby Frye and a small, dapper man known as "Goldy" Ross, owner of the Tecolote, and the new ringleader of the villainies hatched there. Frye was doing most of the talking, in his pompous, windy manner.

"Luck played into your hands, Griswold," he said. "How unfortunate that you mishandled it."

The big Robles foreman bristled.

"I got the kid, didn't I? And he's in the coop, ain't he? And I didn't let Jackass Stroud toss me in any irrigation ditch!"

Frye frowned. That latter comment he preferred to ignore.

"The young offender is in custody, yes. But you haven't proved the offense."

"Blah! When it comes to trial, every man on my outfit'll swear they saw the kid shoot Layton!"

"Shaky testimony that is, without a mite of evidence. Evidence is required to prove even an assault charge, Griswold."

"Yeah? What kind of evidence?"

"For one thing, the assault weapon."

"I can lay hands on that easy enough!"

Cunning crept into Frye's puffy face.

"For another thing," he crooned, "our case would be greatly benefitted if we knew that Layton was dead."

"Then, we'd have the brat for murder, huh?" exulted the slow-witted Griswold.

Frye shifted from that. Leaning forward, eyelids drooped nearly shut, he whispered:

"Griswold, you'd better ride back to that branding cove. Tonight—now! The alarm must have spread, and by daylight all Indian County will be aroused. A search will begin."

"I savvy! Somebody might stumble onto our evidence—the kid's gun, huh?"

Frye leaned back, eyes shifting to Goldy Ross. The dandified boss of Los Pasos was thoughtfully twirling the ends of his waxed mustache. He had flat yellow eyes that looked past Griswold into space.

"Don't be a thick-headed fool, Griswold," he said in a voice devoid of emotion or emphasis. "The gun, yes. But we want murder evidence also."

"The corpus delicti," Frye said softly.

For an instant Griswold's heavy brow puckered. Then he rose half out of his chair, his deep voice husky.

"Layton's body, yuh mean?" he protested. "Listen, Goldy, the boys wouldn't stand for that!"

"The boys don't have to know too much," purred Goldy Ross. "The boys aren't riding back there tonight. You are, Griswold."

Griswold got the rest of the way to his feet and leaned savagely across the table.

"There's a limit, Goldy, and this is it!"

Goldy Ross put the finishing touches on

his mustache and straightened his tie in the reflection of a wall mirror.

"There isn't any limit," he said slowly, "for a low-down lobo that can ride off and leave a wounded man, alone and helpless."

Griswold's face turned an angry purple. He hunched his shoulders, knotted his fists, and made a menacing step.

Frye lifted a fat hand.

"Easy, my friend. Suppose Layton is done for anyhow. You'd do as much for a crippled horse, wouldn't you? Forget what the boss just said. Maybe he was a trifle aggravated, thinking you ungrateful for several things he's done for you."

"Such as keeping your filthy neck out of a noose, when I got others to cover up your clumsy tracks on a T Bar T job. And a few other small favors."

Goldy yawned. He rose and strolled toward the archway that led to the casino and bar, thumbs tucked in his fancy vest.

Frye smirked up at Griswold.

"You're tagged, my friend." He pushed to his feet and waddled after Ross. "I mustn't delay you. It's late and I'm sure you want to have this little matter cleaned up before the night's over. So long, Griswold. And good going."

Griswold, as he had been so bluntly and so recently reminded, was no intellectual giant. But he was smart enough to know from former dealings that Goldy Ross was utterly cold-blooded and ruthless. He knew that if he ignored Goldy's command that he was as good as dead.

So he stalked through the brightly-lighted, crowded Tecolote to the hitch-rack, mounted and rode from town. . . .

STEELE was telling his attack plan when fast hoofs sounded from below. The way a man rode often revealed his state of mind, the Sheriff knew. Here came somebody driven by urgency and temper. Tersely he ordered Shorty, Bertram and Stroud to cover. He stationed himself at the crest of the bluff.

The rider loomed suddenly. Steele kneed the gelding onto the trail, blocking it.

"Grab high, hombre!" he rapped out, showing the rider the snout of a Colt.

Griswold's hands went up as his horses reared to a stop.

"Easy on that trigger, pard!" he said in a strained voice. "Yuh got the wrong man. Whoever yuh're lookin' for, it ain't me."

There was no mistaking that voice. Brush rustled back from the trail as Stroud burst into the open. No longer was he slow and easy-going.

"It's the one they call Griz, Sheriff!" he sang out fiercely. "Let me at him!"

He made for the dumbfounded Robles foreman and grabbed his collar in a twist hold.

"Where's my boy?" he stormed. "Talk fast or I'll give it to yuh!"

Griswold's upraised hands locked together and came down like a sledge-hammer, breaking Stroud's hold. Stroud smashed him in the face as they clashed together. Griswold toed the flank of Stroud's horse. It leaped, unseating the man, leaving him dangling with an arm clamped around Griswold's neck. Griswold kicked him. With a grunt, Stroud let go and dropped.

Shorty and Bertram swarmed in as Griswold started a wild getaway. There was a momentary tangle of horses that prevented Steele from shooting.

Then Griswold streaked out. Stroud, in saddle again, started after him. So did Shorty, whipping out his .45.

"Don't shoot!" Steele barked at the little deputy. "Back here, all of yuh!"

Rescuing the boy was more important than stopping the Robles foreman. And gunfire would arouse the town. The success of their undertaking depended largely on surprise.

Stroud was raging. Bertram, usually easily excited, endeavored to calm him.

"I could of blowed his ears off with buckshot," he told Stroud, "with this old sawed-off. But what would that gain us? First things first, Joe. We'll finish with that hombre later. Right now, like the Sheriff says, the main job is before us."

Steele finished his orders.

"Stroud, you and the Judge head straight for the jail. The Judge knows the way. It's on that short side street back of the Telecote. Have yore rope loose and ready, Judge."

"It's the waitin' there that'll be hard," Bertram grumbled impatiently.

"The segundo," Steele continued, "will station himself in front of the Telecote on his pinto and hold my hoss. I go inside and look for Griswold."

"For Griswold?" exploded Bertram. "But he's gone!"

"I make it known I'm after him for killin' Layton."

"But he didn't! Besides, Layton was shot on Robles ground, in Los Pasos County!"

"There's a way around that slight technicality, Judge. But my main idea is to get the Telecote crowd to admit they're holdin' Stubby. I'll contrive to get down to the jail with somebody, to talk to him. Our chance will come when that jail door is opened. You, Judge, sluice that back street if interference comes from the direction of the Telecote. Stroud, you hit the backtrail with yore boy. The rest of us will guard yore getaway."

"But good Godfrey, it strikes me as a crazy risk for yuh to go into the Telecote alone!" Bertram protested.

"Not alone, exactly. The segundo will cover my play."

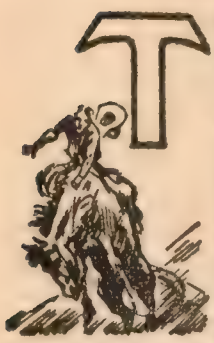
"But thunderation, yuh said he stays out

in front with the hosses, his and yores!"

"A man in saddle has a good view of anything that goes on inside the Telecote. Over the top of the swingin' doors. The segundo and I have been over this ground before, Judge."

CHAPTER V

Fighting Fear



THE Painted Postmen started down the bluff. At the edge of town they split up. Bertram and Stroud circled widely for the jail. Steele and Shorty jogged along the main street and halted in the swath of light in front of the Tecolote.

Steele stepped from saddle and confidently entered.

He was taking desperate risks. He realized it more fully than before as he saw Goldy Ross and J. Weatherby Frye together at the bar.

A bartender saw Steele, slid alertly to the pair, leaned over and whispered a warning. Frye spun around, his thick-lidded eyes blinking.

Goldy Ross, at Steele's approach, lifted a glass to his lips but kept his yellow, owl-round eyes on the backbar mirror. He didn't lower it until Steele, standing directly behind them, spoke.

"I've come for Griswold, gents," he said.

Goldy Ross set down his glass, touched a handkerchief to his bee-stung, over-red lips and turned slowly.

"What do you want with Griswold?" he inquired.

"Murder."

Goldy Ross arched an eyebrow, leaning easily on one elbow on the bar, half-filled glass still in his hand.

"Who did Griswold murder?" he asked with mocking politeness.

"A Robles puncher named Layton."

Frye's restless eyes swerved to Ross with unspoken questions. Was Layton already dead? How had Steele learned that? The lawyer broke the uneasy silence.

"Where and when did this alleged homicide take place?" he asked.

Steele knew that the query implied his lack of authority outside his own bailiwick. He was prepared for it.

"Layton's hoss is out in front. Layton is in Indian County."

Goldy Ross retained his poise, all except a slim hand that toyed nervously with his watch-chain.

"You're barking up the wrong tree, Steele," he said finally. "Griswold isn't here."

Frye's mind was floundering. His mouth opened, then puckered shut. He looked like a fat carp out of water. How much did Steele know? How much was he bluffing? His eyes sought Ross again. The saloon man turned his back on both of them with seeming indifference.

"These range rows don't concern me," he said, and shrugged. "I have my own business and I attend to it."

Steele felt that he was making progress. He had split them by letting them deceive themselves. He had not actually said that Layton was dead. He never lied. His granite-gray eyes pinioned the lawyer against the bar.

"This particular range row concerns you, Frye," he said accusingly. "You tied into it early in the game. That links yuh with Griswold. Mebbe yuh better come along with me."

Frye squirmed, then became acutely aware of being the center of attention. Boisterous voices had died down along the bar. Across the room the rattle of the roulette ball could be heard, but the players had turned from the game. Everyone was watching, straining to hear.

Frye inflated himself and decided to make a bold front.

"You'll be shocked to know, my friend," he said glibly, "that Layton was shot by a minor named Stroud. That being the case, you don't want Griswold. I might add that the shooting occurred in Los Pasos County in the presence of witnesses, which puts the case squarely in our jurisdiction. And you're quite right when you say the case concerns me. I have been appointed special prosecutor, and furthermore we have young Stroud safely in custody."

Steele tried to look surprised at Frye's dramatic announcement.

"I'll believe that when the boy tells me so, himself," he said after a broken moment.

He had built shrewdly to this climax. Frye's next words would mean success or failure for his plan. Stroud deliberated, his mouth puckered roundly. He had no right to hold any prisoner incommunicado and he knew that Steele, as a law officer, understood this and would assert himself accordingly.

"I see no reason why you shouldn't be permitted to interview our prisoner," he said, with a patronizing smile. He drew his frock coat together and pushed from the bar. "Follow me," he said, waddling for the back room exit. . . .

KANEER, of the Rancho Robles, had not gone to Los Pasos with Griswold and the others. He devised an excuse to veer off for the Robles home spread. He was indifferent to the fate of Stroud's boy, but he was haunted by thoughts of Layton, so

heartlessly abandoned. He and Layton had been friends. He could not forget Layton's last reproachful look as his erstwhile comrades deserted him.

At bedtime, unable to endure his nagging conscience any longer, Kaneer slipped away from the ranch. He took food and water and stripped blankets from his own bunk.

He reached the branding cove and found where Layton had lain and bled. But there was no trace of the wounded man or his horse.

Kaneer searched in widening circles that carried him to the creek. There it dawned on him that Layton might have crossed. It was natural that he would have sought the nearest help. That would be at Stroud's Jackass Ranch.

The thought increased his agitation. If Layton had lived to tell what had actually happened that afternoon, the case against the Stroud boy was ruined. There was even another unpleasant possibility. Suppose Layton confessed that they had been branding a T Bar T calf when the boy interrupted them. Kaneer himself had plied the hot iron.

Kaneer had left the Robles place on an errand of mercy, but self-preservation was what drove him now, down the creek and to Stroud's. If Layton was in enemy hands he would almost certainly spill everything to avenge himself. If he had, Kaneer could make himself scarce.

He made straight for that pinpoint of lamplight that marked the Stroud house, dismounted below the stockade and crept up on the place. He saw Doc Crabtree in the porch doorway, in white shirt and rolled-up sleeves. He saw him approach a prone figure on a cot. He heard low talk, and made out Layton's weak, shaken voice.

He had heard enough. He groped his way back to his horse and was mounting when a voice stabbed out of the dark.

"Here's medicine, yuh yellow quitter!"

A shot blazed. Kaneer instinctively drew and fired at the powder flame.

Luck guided his lead. He heard a wet cough, a thud as his attacker hit the ground. Then he sprang to saddle and streaked back across the creek, into the gap and along the trail to Los Pasos. He was glad he had food and blankets, because he was heading for the border and Beyond. But on the way he would spread the alarm in Los Pasos. . . .

Griswold did not know that he was riding to his death as he fled from Steele and his party. All he knew was that Stroud had learned that he had captured the boy. There could be only one explanation for that. The Painted Post crowd had found Layton. That being the case, Goldy Ross would hold him responsible for the slip-up.

He paused at the Robles home spread to rouse out Kaneer to help him. Kaneer's bunk was empty, bared of blankets. It was easy to guess where Kaneer had gone. It was even possible that Kaneer, instead of Layton, had put Steele and the others onto the Stroud boy's whereabouts.

Panicky now, Griswold rushed into the night and rode again. At the branding cove he also found where Layton had wet the sod with his blood. By now Griswold had accumulated enough known facts to lead him straight for the Stroud place.

He reached there as Kaneer was leaving, recognized his horse, fired and missed. Then something exploded in his consciousness and he knew no more. He went down with a bullet in his head. . . .

Back in the Tecolote, J. Weatherby Frye led Steele out the rear door and along the dark, narrow street toward the jail. As he went, Goldy Ross turned from the bar and motioned to a knot of gaping Robles riders across by the gaming tables. They understood the signal. They followed Frye and Steele.

Shorty, from his vantage point on the pinto, saw the play and was at the back door as the Robles punchers appeared there, blinking confusedly from the sudden change from the brightly lighted casino to the thick, outer darkness.

"Stay inside, gents!" Shorty sang out. "This night air ain't healthy."

They couldn't see him, but they were aware of more than one horse out there. They faltered, mumbling among themselves.

Frye and Steele reached the jail.

"He's inside," Frye said, halting. "You can talk through the bars."

LIKE the jail at Painted Post, this one was built of thick-walled adobe, with flat roof and projecting timber rafters. A bolt-studded door and small barred window faced the street.

Bertram and Stroud closed in suddenly.

"It's the key we want, Frye," Steele gritted, pressing a Colt muzzle into the lawyer's ribs.

A face appeared at the cell gratings.

"Sheriff!" cried Stubby Stroud. "Dad!"

"Goldy has the key," Frye said. "I counted on something like this, Steele. So did he. An attempted jailbreak leads to serious consequences. A lawless effort to thwart justice was a foolish move on your part. Shooting me will not improve your situation. I wonder who the new Sheriff of Painted Post will be?"

Frye was calm, for the rear door of the Tecolote had opened as he spoke. But as he finished, Shorty and the three horses blotted the lighted opening and the little deputy's health advice drifted to them.

"Toss yore rope across that rafter end overhead, Judge," Steele said briskly.

Bertram flung the loosened coils. Steele seized the dangling noose and dropped it

over Frye's head.

The rasp of hemp brought a yammer for help from Frye. It was choked off as Steele jerked the noose tight.

"Up with him, Judge, till his feet clear!" he crackled. "Lucky he's fat enough to stop lead! Yuh can work behind his carcass, both of yuh! One of them bars should bend enough to let a small-sized youngster out!"

Bertram and Stroud, both powerful men, went to work, with Frye shielding them from the direction of the Tecolote. As they did, two shots streaked from the doorway. A third shot slanted down. It brought a yowl.

The fight was on. Steele sped up the street to Shorty's aid.

He was alive to every movement and sound. The lives of them all depended on swift, sure work—and luck. He heard a hard-ridden horse out in front of the Tecolote, coming toward the resort. Was Griswold returning with a belated warning?

Whoever it was, he had arrived in the Tecolote, and his arrival produced a change. Goldy sounded a sharp command. The Robles men drew inside. A silence ensued, the sort that follows loud thunder. Steele's sharp hearing probed that silence.

"They got Layton, boys!" he heard a breathless, excited voice say. "He's at Stroud's! You all savvy what that means!"

"It means we're a pack of dumb fools if we poke our necks out any farther!" somebody answered.

"Migosh, Sheriff, who's that?" croaked Shorty. "It shore ain't Griz's wagon-on-a-plank-bridge voice!"

Goldy spoke again, his voice smooth and emotionless in contrast to that of the new arrival. The Sheriff was jolted. Goldy was addressing him.

"Hullo, out there! Call it off, Steele, you hear? Send Frye back in here!"

"Frye's busy, Ross," Steele answered.

"But he forgot the jail key! The prisoner is yours, Steele."

Shorty gasped. A wrenching sound came from the jail and a sliced moment later hoofs moved. Judge Bertram called out guardedly. Steele started off, leading Layton's horse. Stubby would need it for his homeward ride.

"Thanks, Ross," he flung back. "I'm sendin' Frye back."

Shorty hurried after Steele.

"Reckon that'll hold 'em!" he chattered. "Till we get clear of the town!"

Free of the noose, J. Weatherby Frye tore for the Tecolote. When he arrived in the back room there, Goldy Ross stood before the wall mirror, smoothing his thin blond hair. With a final, fastidious touch he pocketed the comb and turned to the puffing, mottle-faced lawyer. His yellow eyes were ugly as a snake's.

"I think I'll give up this business," he said abruptly.

Frye stared. His lips trembled but no sound came from them. He fumbled shakily at his throat.

"With the prize collection of jackasses I have, including you, I think I can beat Stroud at his own game," Goldy finished.

Up the trail, out of Los Pasos, five riders headed, thankful and unmolested, for the Snaketrack.

Next Issue: SHERIFF BLUE STEELE in THE BORDER BRUTE

"Silence!" Lord Wilcox roars, threatening Ham with his crop

HAM AND THE SOUR KRAUTS

By ALFRED L. GARRY

Sheriff Egg and Deputy Ham tackle a tough omelet of mystery when phony aristocrats try to hornswoggle Sweetgrass County!

JUST about the time me and my deputy, Ham, get law and order in Sweetgrass County house broke, some wave of law roweling is shore to break out.

This one dates back plumb to the turn of the century when me and Ham see the woe-begone expression on Mort Clapp's face as he comes out of the bank. His mouth is curved down, and the worry lines on his face are furrowed deep. He takes an uncertain step toward his bronc, hesitates as though he's wrestling with himself. Then with shoulders hunched in despair, he clumps toward Freddie's Bar.

Ham catches my eye.

"Let's head him off," he says.

You see, Mort Clapp used to be a hellion. There wasn't a gambling game he hadn't tried to bust, or a saloon he hadn't shot up between El Paso and Virginia City. After the third drink, Mort used to be willing to stack triggers with Wyatt Earp, and give him the first two shots. Then Mort met and married Hazel Hall, the Sweetgrass schoolma'am. He climbed on the water wagon, straightening out like a string. They homesteaded Wallow Valley, and brought in our first whiteface. That was twenty-five years ago.

Today, Mort and Hazel own one of the

finest small breeding stock ranches in Montaner. They raise high grade beef bulls. Why, only last year Mort was able to borrow fifteen thousand dollars to buy five pedigreed sires.

As Ham and I clump after the saloon-bound rancher, we know something must be powerfully wrong to make him want to drowned his grief in red-eye.

"Hi, Mort," Ham says, taking one of his elbows, while I fall in step on the other side. "Where yuh headin'?"

"Freddie's Bar," Mort replies in a hoarse, dispirited voice.

"Good!" Ham says, before I can edge in a word. "I'm feelin' like a drink myself."

I'm plumb disgusted. What that lummox pardner of mine won't do for a free drink!

Three abreast, we push through the swinging doors and up to the bar. Freddie's been a barkeeper too long to be surprised at anything. But when he sees us herding the teetotaler, Mort Clapp, into his deadfall, his eyebrows do a cat's back. And when Ham orders the drinks, Freddie's jaw goes slack. His eyes pop out so far you could have knocked them off with a stick.

Because before the downhearted Mort can open his mouth, Ham orders in a loud voice:

"Three sarsaprillas!"

"Sarsaparillas?"

Mort Clapp darts Ham a funny look. His face clouds. But Ham's already sipping his drink and talking to Mort like you'd soothe a badly spooked bronc. The deep worry lines on the rancher's face gradually ease out.

"Thanks, fellows," Mort says simply. "It would have been sort of foolish for me to go on a bender after all these years. But I'm in a pinch."

WELL, his trouble is simple. To buy them five blooded bulls, Mort went out on a limb. He knew Banker Williams would never screw down on him. But he didn't figger that Banker Williams, to get more ready cash, would sell his mortgage to an Eastern money syndicate. Now, through Banker Williams, the syndicate is bearing down. They want their money, or else!

"Why don't yuh go East and ask the syndicate to hold off till yuh can sell some breedin' stock?" Ham asks.

"Banker Williams has already explained to the New York manager," Mort replies. "But it's no dice. He says the head office in Hamburg has ordered him to collect."

"Hamburg?" Ham muses. "Germany? That's queer! Most them money syndicates are headed up in New York or London!"

Gosh, I sometimes think my pardner has tabby-cat blood in his viens. He's always smelling a rat!

And the very next day our rash of picayunish law-busting breaks out. Ike Greenwood stomps into the office madder than hops.

"My largest birch tree!" he storms. "A birch tree my father brung all the way from Ohio sixty years ago! Plumb ruined!"

Nothing would do but that I mount and ride out to his ranch. There, in a grove of birches planted in the early days, I see something that makes my blood boil. For the tallest, straightest, and largest birch has been completely ruined. Someone has stripped off twelve feet of the bark. The naked trunk tree is done for!

"Who'd do a thing like that?" I muse, finger currying my scalp.

"That's what you're paid to find out!" Ike snaps.

There's no mistaking his tone. Ike votes a sizable number of cowhands. If I want to stay in office, I'd better find out who committed this horticultural mayhem.

But I no sooner get back to my office, than I find Sweetgrass buzzing like a tromped-on hornet's nest. Newton Pike, holding the bridle of his fine black mare, is frothing at the mouth as he harangues a group of angry-faced waddies.

"She's ruined!" Newton bellows. "Plumb spoiled for these parts! I'm ashamed to fork her now!"

And who wouldn't be! Some miscreant has docked his fine black mare's tail.

"Sheriff"—Newton whirls on me—"either yuh find this bronc maimer, or—"

"Aw, cool off!" Ham shouldered his way through the crowd. "That bronc ain't damaged none. It's a mighty high class job. Yuh could get a fine price for that bronc from an Eastern dude. They think docked tails are fancy."

"Yeah?" Newton snarls. "And out here you two old mosshorns'd look fancy herdin' sheep! It's up to you to find who did the tail butcherin'!"

I don't exactly tremble in my boots. But almost. Because with Ike voting against us because of his stripped birch tree, and Newton because of his hoss's docked tail, we may get bounced out of office. And I for one don't care for mutton.

"Yeah, and I got a beef too!"

Old "Buff" Jones, his buffalo gun cradled in his arm, and his long gray hair blowing in the prairie wind, stomps red-eyed into the center of the crowd.

"Danged if Sweetgrass ain't goin' to the dogs!" he charges. "It's gettin' so's a feller can't sleep off a drunk in the gutter without gettin' robbed!"

"Go on," Ham chides. "What you got that anybody'd want?"

"My Three-X beaver hat!" Buff Jones shouts. "My danged best hat! The one give me by General Miles, back in eighty-six when I scouted Geronimo. It's been rustled!"

That shore relieves the tension. The hairpins howl with laughter. If there was a more disreputable looking sky-piece in Montaner than Buff's old battered and grease-stained campaign hat, I'd like to see it.

When we get back to the office, Ham says:

"Egg, this letter came a few days back. I forgot to show it to yuh. Yuh'll have to attend to it. I'm takin' a pasear down Colorado way."

Ain't that just like my flitter-brained pardner! He forgets to show me a letter from the Governor of Montaner. And then instead of siding me in doing the favor the Governor asks, the lummox runs out on me. Just at the time when we need all the political help we can get.

The Governor's letter asks a favor. It says:

A Lord Brawley and Lord Wilcox, from England, wish to hunt in your territory. They are very eccentric, and wish to hunt alone, with just one Indian guide. Will you, as a personal favor to me, find them a suitable Indian guide who can cook. They arrive on the 20th.

"There ain't a warwhoop in the country who can cook worth sour apples!" I grouch. "Why can't these Englishers take a white chuckwagon cook?"

"Yeah," Ham mumbles, throwing together his possibles for the trip. "Yeah. Queer, ain't it?"

WELL, me, I'm about throwed. I look into every tepee in our part of Montaner, trying to find an Injun that might be able to guide and pot-wollop for them Britishers. I don't find one fit to cook in a jail where the customers can't stampede. I don't want to let our Governor down, or cause one of them international incidents by ruining a couple of lords' stomachs.

I shore ain't no happier when the same lords pile off the train. They're rigged out in tweed shooting jackets with leather patches on the shoulders. Their assortment of guns would have won the war for Sittin' Bull.

"Aw, you are the High Sheriff," Lord Brawley says, handing me a limp hand as though he was afraid of getting anthrax.

"Yep," I say, not knowing whether he was referring to my office or my smell.

From the way his Lordship Wilcox is looking me over with a eyeglass screwed up into one eye, I ain't so sure it ain't the latter.

"And you have our Indian guide?" Brawley questions.

"That's just the trouble." I hem and haw. "These prairie Injuns ain't like the northwoods Injuns. They don't make good guides. But I got a mighty fine round-up cook lined up for yuh."

"Won't do!" Lord Wilcox snaps. "We must have an aboriginal."

"Then yuh'd better—" I commence, getting hot under the collar at his high-hat.

I'm all set to tell 'em to go to the northwoods, or a hotter place. But I don't finish my sentence. Because around the bend in the river comes a canoe. A birch-bark canoe, paddled by a fat rolypoly Injun. He's no Dakota or Blackfoot. And even though he's got the corporation, he ain't no Gros Ventre. He beaches his canoe and commences to make camp.

Before we can walk the three hundred yards to the river's bank, this strange Injun's got a fire going and is building himself a bait of grub. He's the answer to our prayer. His fast-made camp is neat and orderly. He has his clean cooking tools laid out, and is already frying crisp fragrant bacon while he molds his biscuits.

As he turns toward us, his chubby face is almost completely hid by his long black hair and a clean cloth he's got his face wrapped in. One jaw is bulged out under the cloth. He's got a bad tooth.

"How, Chief!" I say, coming close. "Where from?"

"Shores of Git-ya-gummy," the Indian grunts, waving to the north.

"Cree?"

"Ojibwa."

"What's yore name?"

"Lumpum Jippie Saitcee."

"I say, ol' chap, what does that mean?" Lord Brawley sticks in his oar.

The Ojibwa flashes his lordship a look from under the brim of his battered old hat, and says, without a smile, in tolerable English:

"Him means, 'Man-who-thinks-everything-not-all-right-perhaps!"

"Mind if we call you Mr. Perhaps?" Lord Wilcox says with a silly giggle.

"Perhaps," the Ojibwa grunts. "Shore, I'm Perhaps."

Well, the upshot is that we hire Perhaps.

"He's a stranger in these parts," I explain. "He won't be much use in guidin' yuh."

"Oh, we've got maps," Lord Wilcox blurts.

If looks could wither a man, the daggers that Lord Brawley looks at his partner would have shriveled him like drouthed bunchgrass.

Them lords seem to have money to burn. They ask me to get them some saddle horses and a cook wagon. I make a dicker with Newt Pike and get the outfit, including that bob-tailed mare, for five hundred dollars. I sell it to them London suckers for seven hundred and fifty.

I'm pocketing the money when that Injun, Perhaps, sidles up to me. He's holding out his hand.

"What yuh want?" I ask.

"Half the cheat!" he grunts, avoiding my eye. "Or I no go."

Well, a hundred and twenty-five dollars ain't bad for a few hours' work, so I shell out. Only that money-wise warwhoop ain't getting the best of me. When he returns after the trip, I'll arrest him for walking on the wrong side of the street, or something, and fine him one hundred and twenty-five dollars, plus any other loose change he may have in his pockets.

TWO weeks later Mort Clapp, white with prairie dust, rides his hip-shot bronc up to the office. He dismounts with the stiffness of a man long in the saddle. His face is a mask of worried discouragement.

"Eggs," he says, sinking wearily into a chair, "two of my expensive blooded bulls are gone. They disappeared without a trace."

"Wolves or coyotes?" I suggest.

"I've been ridin' down wheelin' buzzards for a week." Mort shakes his head. "They ain't lyin' dead any place on my range. They've been rustled!"

"But if a rustler was goin' to run off yore bulls, he'd take all five, instead of just two," I reason. "I'd better go have a look-see."

It's just as Mort said. Only when we get back, it's three bulls missing instead of two. Just like the others, we can track this bull to the river, where it went for a drink. And that's the end of it.

Golly, I wish old Ham would get back. It's times like this that I need my old side-kick. He ain't altogether bright, but just the same, when it comes to tracking or lawing, that walrus-mustached old longhorn's no dumber than a fox.

Leaving Mort to guard his two remaining bulls, I commence to scour the hills, riding the ridges, and sweeping the lowlands with my glasses. There ain't nothing to arouse my suspicions. A sheep outfit passes far off in the distance.

At the far corner of Mort's range an old prospector is poking around an abandoned mining shaft. I can't recognize him through the glasses. But them old boys never lose hope. I watch this fellow wheel a load of material to the river, and pan it careful for color. Nothing suspicious about that, so I don't even go near him.

I work down to a sandbar on the river, and bed down for the night. I sleep like a log, and the next morning take my coffee pot to the river, and dip it full of water.

My hair suddenly stands on end! Goose pimples break out along my spine! It ain't the dawn gap-wind that sets my hands to shivering, as I read what's written on the small new white chip of wood I've dipped up with my coffee water.

On it is scrawled:

Egg, you're being watched. Keep your head swiveling like a owl's, and your safety off. Ham.

A thousand questions pop through my mind. Where is Ham? What's he doing? Why ain't he joined me? Who's going to pounce on me so sudden I got to keep my rifle safety off?

Then like an avalanche crumbles a log cabin, I cave in inside. I ain't going to be braced man to man. Whoever Ham's warning me against is going to bushwhack me. Shoot me down from a drygulch. Some place I'll skyline myself. Wham! The unknown drygulcher will let me have it. I've got to stick to the shadows, and keep my safety off.

As I'm standing there, another chip comes bobbing down stream. I wade in and dip it up. The scrawled message is the same. But if I'm in danger, why ain't Ham joined me?

The answer's right in my hand! My stomach ties itself into knots as I suddenly realize Ham can't come. He's a prisoner. My pardner is tossing those scrawled chips into the river on the sly. Broadcasting hundreds of them in hopes I'll see one.

There's a rustling in the brush. I jump about a mile, whipping out my six-gun as I whirl. It's only a wren. But it shows how jittery I am. I quick break camp without making breakfast, move on a few miles. Building myself a tiny fire of smokeless deadwood against a cliff, I boil up a pot of strong coffee. It steadies my nerves. I hunker down on my heels, roweling my gray matter, trying to reason this thing out.

Wham!

My hat gives a tug. The dead pine opposite me spatters rotten wood. I hear a distant whiplike crack.

Before my shirt buttons hit the dust, there's another report. The muffled, distant, bellowing roar of a heavily powdered big bore. No lead spatters. Big bores ain't got much range. So that shot wasn't aimed at me.

But the first gun was. There's no mistaking the pencil-sized holes drilled in my sombrero. Whoever took that downhill shot at me didn't allow for the drop. But he didn't hold much too high.

Now who, in this land of man-sized lead heavers, goes around tryin' to bushwhack people with a smokepole throwing popgun-sized bullets?

I wiggle around the dead pine, gather my feet under me and, buck-jumping like a scared pronghorn, make a run for my bronc. I mount and commence riding. I don't slow up until my cayuse is completely winded. By that time I'm downright mad. No feller can throw a slug at me, even a small one, and get away with it!

WHOEVER took the potshot at me was high in the ridges. So I tie my bronc to the ground, and commence to work up the draws. My eyes are peeled, and my rifle's ready. I plumb aim to throw fast lead, and then find out who I'm shooting at after.

I'm working my way over a hogback on my stomach when a voice behind turns my blood to ice water.

"Sheriff," the voice barks gruffly, "don't move. Drop yore gun!"

I freeze. The hackles on the back of my neck rise. My shoulder muscles bunch. I brace myself for the impact of a slug. But it don't come.

After what seems ages of cold-sweat agony, the voice chuckles:

"Slack off, Egg. Yuh ain't goin' to get plugged!"

I turn quickly. Grinning toothlessly is old Buff Jones, his ancient Sharps buffalo gun cradled easily in his arm.

"What's the idea?" I demand angrily. "Somebody tried to bushwhack me. I might have plugged yuh!"

"Yeah, if yuh'd seen me." Buff spits contemptuously. "Only I could have had yore hair any time I'd wanted it for the past hour."

"What?"

"Shore." The old Injun scout grins. "It's just natural for a feller that's been shot at to get curious. I figgered yuh'd be workin' up one of these draws. Cut yore trail back aways. Why, in Apache country—"

"Come clean!" I snap, before old Buff can go on a long-winded Apache scout. "What'n thunderation yuh doin' out here?"

"Just gettin' my hat back," Buff declares vehemently. "The selfsame hat General Miles give me for tailin' Geronimo. It's been washed!" Buff finishes sadly. "And danged near ruined!"

"Yes, yes, I know," I cut in. "Come to the point."

Buff darts me an injured look. "Well, I got my hat back," he snaps. "Even though I had to spoil it!"

Sure enough! Tunneled through the crown is the big half-inch hole of a .45-90 buffalo gun slug.

"Who had it, Buff?" I want to know.

"That cussed Ojibwa Injun, I thought," Buff declares. "Collected his scalp too. But it's plumb unnatural!"

Buff digs into his pocket and hauls out a handful of long black hair. He passes it over to me. It always gives me the creeps to handle a fresh scalp. I recoil.

"Gettin' soft in yore old age?" Buff chides, with a chuckle. "There's somethin' mighty fishy about this scalp. Look it over."

What Buff hands me ain't no scalp at all. It's a long switch of black horse hair tied in the middle!

"What yuh make of it, Buff?" I ask, plumb throwed.

"Well," he reflects, "I ain't ever seen a bald-headed Injun." He adds with a gruesome chuckle, "That is, alive."

"The fellow who cut Ike's mare's tail, and swiped yore hat was set to disguise hisself as an Injun!" I suddenly see the light. "He was the hombre that attempted to bushwhack me."

"I'll declare he was!" Buff agrees. "He was spread out on a flat rock. Rested his gun on a log, and was sightin' through one of them telescope sights when I snuck up on him. I figgered he was drawin' a bead on a deer. So I let him squeeze off his shot before I reclaimed my hat by shootin' it off his head. He lit out like a house afire. When I climbed down to get my hat, I seen you make a dash for yore bronc. Then I realized there was skullduggery afoot, and pushed over to cut yore trail."

"Whoever tried to bushwhack me is holdin' Ham a prisoner," I tell Buff, showing him the scrawled message on the white chip.

"Their camp's upstream," Buff observes. "Let's cut down to the river."

"Yes," I agree, "we'll pick up that old prospector who's washin' gold at the mine shaft. The three of us should be able to handle most anything."

"Three?" Buff shoots me a queer glance "I'd hold my hosses there!"

"Why?" I want to know.

"Ever see a prospector who knew Montaner wash clay for gold?" Buff questions. "Yuh danged tootin' yuh ain't! Our gold's in sand and gravel."

"Shore!" I ejaculate. "That hombre was washin' clay. He's a fake!"

My hand's trembling as I light my quirly. This thing is getting too complicated. Buff's old hat. The hoss tail. The genuine Ojibwa. The missing bulls. The bushwhacking. Ham's message. The fake Injun. And the queer-acting prospector.

THEN something clicks. That first Ojibwa showed up in a birch-bark canoe. Did he get that birch-bark from Ike's grove?

"Gosh all hemlock!" I groan. "Mebbe he's a fake too!"

And if them two Englishers get killed in this ruckus, I've got an international incident in my lap that'll bust me right back to a sheep camp. Oh—oh! Why didn't I save my money while I was young?

"When I was scoutin' for Geronimo, I done a lot of it at night," Buff advises. "If we don't want to get salivated, we'd better do likewise."

Now, I've done considerable night skulking in my day. But as we work our way up the river in the gathering twilight, Buff Jones learns me things I never knew. I'll swear that old hide-hunter can smell out the easy way around canyons. And when it comes to climbing a rock wall in the dark, he goes up like a cockroach scampers up a cookhouse wall.

Suddenly he grabs my arm, sniffing, casting about with his long thin nose like a coon hound.

"Smell it, Egg?" he whispers.

I sniff, but don't smell nothing unusual.

"Come over here where the down wind eddies in the river bend." Buff leads me on. "Now sniff. It's stronger here."

I can smell it. The odor is something I can't place. It ain't exactly like the whiff you used to get when you rode on the windward of an Injun tree burial. It's vegetable. Once I busted into the root cellar of a nester's deserted place. The rotten vegetables gave off about the same smell.

As we work up the river, the smell becomes

stronger. We veer toward it. Cautiously peering over the rim-rocks, we see a pinpoint of light. It glimmers from under a rocky ledge. We work down toward it. The unholy smell becomes stronger as we wade up the river, silently as a pair of otter. Like a sign post, the smell leads us round a bend, and up a little creek. Ahead of us is the camp, hidden in a rock cleft of the cliffs.

And what I see in that camp causes my muscles to bunch in a sudden blinding red rage. Insanely, I claw out my cutters. Buff Jones lays a heavy restraining hand on me, hauling my tense body down behind the rocks.

"Easy does it, man!" he whispers fiercely in my ear. "Easy!"

I'm still trembling with rage. For in that camp is my pardner Ham. A prisoner, clad only in his long underwear. He's got a chain around his ankle, and it's fastening him to a sapling like a dog.

The trembling leaves me icy cold. I again peer over the rock. The chain around Ham's leg is long enough so he can attend to the small cooking fire. He's cooking a meal. One of the party is asleep in a sleeping bag.

Someone throws open the tent flap. I'm rocked back on my heels. For out of the tent comes Lord Wilcox. He's dressed in a red shirt and hip boots. He's the man we took for a prospector washing clay at the old mine shaft! He strides arrogantly toward Ham.

"Fool!" he snaps. "How many times have I told you not to boil sauerkraut with the lid off?"

With that, he slashes Ham across the face with his riding crop. Ham recoils, his face as livid as the welt the cruel blow raises.

"Sauerkraut!" Buff whispers. "Boiled with the lid off. That's what we've been smellin'. Foxy old Ham! Where'd he get it? He knew if we were scoutin' for him the downriver wind would carry the smell to us. I'll let him know we're here."

Buff drops behind the rock. He muffles his face in his hat and hoots like a far-off owl. I see Ham's ears prick up. He knows the hoot is phony. Yet he does the darnedest thing.

Throwing back his head, Ham commences to sing in a loud off-key voice:

Please go way and let me sleep.

"Silence!" Lord Wilcox roars, threatening Ham with his crop.

"We'd better rush the camp before Ham's caterwaulin' wakes the lord," Buff whispers.

I'm so heaving mad I don't reason. Jumping up, I snap two quick shots at Lord Wilcox. One snatches off his hat, the other kicks dirt from under his boots.

"Sky yore hands!" I shout, leaping into the clearing. "And you, in the sleepin' bag, spread eagle! Or I'll pin yuh down permanent!"

"Watch out!" Ham screams. "I tried to warn yuh! It's a trap!"

Too late. There's a lancelike flare of muzzle blast and a whiplike crash from behind a log. Buff's heavy Sharps clatters to the ground, his knees sag, he pitches on his face. I feel the walnut in my hands jump as I instinctively slip the hammers. A million sparks shatter inside of my head, and all goes black. . . .

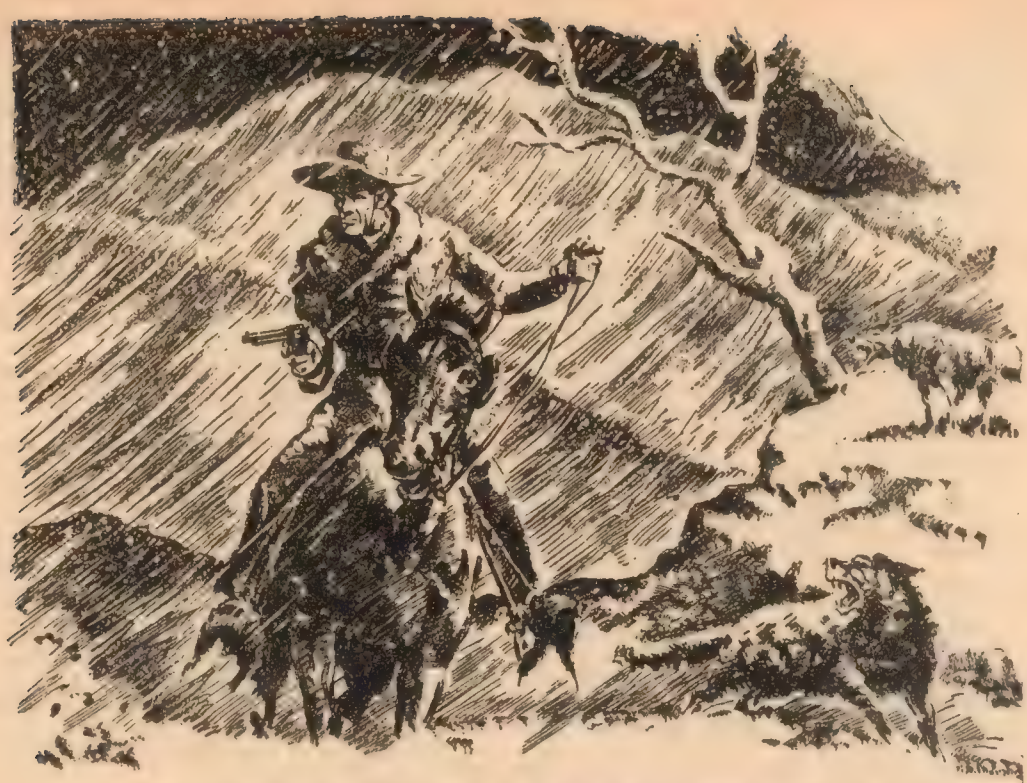
WHEN I come to, I'm hogtied like a yearling. My head aches fit to kill. The side of my face and head is stiff with congealed blood. I've been creased. Gritting my teeth, I shake the cobwebs from my brain. My eyes focus, and I see they've got old Buff roped up opposite me. There's a small stain high on the shoulder of his shirt.

"I could have shot you through the heart just as well!" Lord Brawley snarls, striding over to us. "But we've got use for you. For a while."

My blood runs cold at the way he says, "For a while." I lift my eyes to him. He's dressed in the floppy clothes of the Ojibwa guide I'd hired for him. The poor Injun's been killed in cold blood!

"What yuh intend to do with us?" I ask.

(Continued on page 72)



He was not shooting at the wolves—he was shooting at Wick O'Hara's horse!

THE BLIZZARD OUTCAST

By GUNNISON STEELE

Tossed to the wolves in a bleak white wilderness, Wick O'Hara follows a grim trail to justice and vindication!

CHAPTER I

Blizzard Traitor

LANKY, red-haired Wick O'Hara grinned his rash grin.

"Here she comes, Bill!" he yelled. "Dig in yore teeth and dewclaws or yuh'll get blowed clean off the mountain!"

For hours past the blizzard had been a dark, sullen thing skulking among the higher peaks. But now it swooped suddenly, like a hungry black panther, howling and snarling and squalling its fury. It bellowed out of canyons and across spiny ridges, driving sleet and snow before it. For a moment the mountains seemed to quail with stunned dismay, and then to scream out in sudden wild terror. The sun went out, leaving a gray, shroudlike pall over the highlands.

The storm hammered at Wick O'Hara and his partner, Bill Dante, with incredible savagery. It smashed the breath from them, flung their horses together, then drove them apart, and in the ugly twilight they could barely see each other across the twenty feet of space.

"Stay close—stay close!" Wick yelled, as he fought his horse.

Ice was already coating Bill Dante's dark, hawklike face.

"Yuh reckon that wolf pack's still hangin'

AN ACTION-PACKED COMPLETE NOVELET

on our tails?"

"Shore! Blizzard'll just make 'em hungrier!"

They fought their way along a shallow canyon. They had known where they were before the storm hit, but now all landmarks were lost in the swirling, howling maelstrom. They only knew that somewhere below lay the lowlands and the town of Caribou—Caribou, with its warmth and safety, and a laughing, yellow-haired girl named Rose whom they both loved.

Four months ago, Wick O'Hara and Bill Dante had headed into the Whitebears on a gold-hunting expedition. And, high among the gaunt peaks, they had found "ripples" of virgin gold interlaced in a rotten ledge that had been uncovered by a landslide. Caught up by their wild enthusiasm they had lost all track of time. Even so they had been supplied with ample provisions which were cached in a dugout near the one-room cabin. Enough to last through the winter if necessary.

But the same thing—a landslide, roaring down the mountainside while they were out scrabbling for gold, and burying the dugout under tons of rock, dirt and snow—had brought them to the brink of disaster. Almost without food, and in the teeth of a snarling blizzard, they had been forced to strike out quickly for the lowlands.

THEY had known that a big pack of wolves was prowling in the vicinity of their cabin, watching them. They had heard the hunger cries in the night as the great white beasts raced across the bleak ridges in search of the game that weeks before had fled to the lowlands. Occasionally they had glimpsed the wolves by day as the gaunt beasts, made bold by hunger, shadowed them. Then they had been reasonably safe in the daytime, and at night they had kept to shelter.

But now, ravenous and desperate, their savagery inflamed by the blizzard, anything that moved was food to the big white brutes. They were closing in for the kill!

The blizzard was a monster, screaming violently and wickedly in its many-toned voice. It shoved and wrestled them along the shallow canyon, and out of it, and momentarily jammed them solidly against a rock wall.

They huddled there, feeling like old men who had been flogged.

Wick O'Hara looked at his partner. Bill Dante's big shoulders were humped against the wind. Dante was a handsome man who liked to swagger and wear fancy clothes. But he couldn't swagger here. He was swiping at his eyes, his mouth wide, trying to breathe.

"We've got to find shelter!" he said wildly.

"Where?" O'Hara yelled. "If we could find a good, deep cave—but then the hosses would die."

"Cuss the hosses! Let the wolves have 'em, get their bellies full, then mebbe they'll let us alone!"

"We need the hosses." O'Hara said sharply. "Besides, this storm may last for days. We're down to our last bite of grub, and if we holed up we'd starve. No, we've got to go on."

"What about the wolves?"

"Long as the hosses stay on their feet we're safe."

"But that won't be long. One of the brutes nearly hamstrung my bronc a minute ago. When that happens, we're done."

Bill Dante grabbed out his gun and fired wildly at a gaunt, savage-eyed wolf that had appeared suddenly atop a boulder thirty feet away. But the beast leaped sideward and vanished into the shifting pall.

Dante swore with shrill, almost childlike disappointment.

Wick O'Hara looked at him curiously. He hadn't known much about Bill Dante before they joined forces, share and share alike, to go into the Whitebears. Despite his swaggering and big talk, Dante had seemed like a good gent to tie to. He had seemed square, with more than his share of courage. But now—

"Let's get on," O'Hara said.

They fought the horses away from the partial shelter of the wall and slammed into the blizzard. Looking back, O'Hara saw half a dozen quick-moving white forms leave the boulders and run at them silently. One of the huge beasts leaped in a swift, lunging drive at the hind legs of O'Hara's roan. He snaked out his six-shooter, jabbed it downward and fired.

The wolf made no sound, but its back seemed to break suddenly. It wriggled in a jerky circle on its front legs, hindquarters remaining still. Bill Dante was yelling, firing wildly.

"Get on—get on!" O'Hara bawled, and they spurred their rearing, frightened horses forward.

There was a wicked snarling behind them as the remaining wolves leaped upon their wounded comrade.

But the respite would be brief, they knew. The wind blared in spasmodic gusts now, like the breath of a giant in nightmarish sleep. The snow and sleet cut at them like knives. The first smothering blue twilight had lifted somewhat, and occasionally they caught glimpses of the encircling peaks. But the blizzard had lost none of its deadly savagery.

A series of short, snarling yelps sounded behind them. The horses reared, and screamed with terror. Bill Dante yelled out something in a shrill, ragged voice. Looking back, O'Hara saw the huge wolves, jaws

agape, running with their bellies against the snow.

He fired, again and again, at the shadowy, leaping figures, the sound of his gun flat in the turmoil about them.

They were crossing a bare, exposed ridge at the base of a wedge-shaped peak. Dante had forged on ahead, driving his big sorrel furiously, while O'Hara tried to check the headlong charge of the pack. The wind swept across the bare ridge, trumpeting its triumph and fury, slamming at them full force.

The oncoming wolves seemed part of the whirling, wind-swept snow.

Wick O'Hara, his gun empty, turned to look at Bill Dante. Dante had turned in his saddle and was looking back at his partner. In the grayish murk Dante's face was dim and masklike. He had a gun in his hand, and now he half-turned his horse, twisting in the saddle so that he faced Wick. Dante was turning back to help check the pack's determined charge, O'Hara thought.

HE SAW Dante raise the gun, saw a red blob of flame blossom from its muzzle. And in that instant, even before he felt a shudder go through the roan, he knew that Bill Dante was not shooting at the wolves.

He was shooting at Wick O'Hara's horse!

The roan stumbled, slashing at the hard earth with its hoofs. Dante was firing again, deliberately, his face wickedly set in the half-gloom.

And suddenly the roan went down, falling forward, flinging O'Hara headlong to the ground.

He landed on his arm and shoulder, with a stunning impact, and rolled over and over, what was happening a confused blur in his mind. Bill Dante had shot his horse, literally feeding both the dead horse and Wick O'Hara to the wolves, hoping to save himself!

O'Hara felt no anger, right then, only a dazed wonder.

He smashed into a boulder. He reeled to his feet, but his legs seemed made of rubber, and the world was spinning so before his eyes that he had lost all sense of direction. He felt his legs give way, knew he was hunkered on the ground. He heard the wild howl of the wind sweeping across the flat ridge-top, the eager, whining snarls of the wolves—and instinctively he forced himself forward and started rolling again.

Then he knew he was falling. He landed with a thud, and kept on rolling, without effort, down a steep decline. It seemed that he rolled a long time, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, feeling only sharp pain as he smashed against boulders or other objects. Then he stopped rolling, abruptly, jarringly, with the earth seeming to explode in a many-hued pattern before his eyes.

CHAPTER II

The Outcast

LATER, Wick O'Hara knew he must not have lost consciousness immediately, knew he must have instinctively forced his muscles to do things he didn't remember doing. For he was lying on the floor of a cavelike crevice jutting back into a granite wall. The narrow entrance to the cave had been blocked with small boulders. It was dry here, but bitterly cold. He could hear the muted voice of the wind.

He sat up, groaning softly, his whole body a pulsing ache. It took him several minutes to remember what had happened. Then he sat there in the dark, head in hands, thinking about what Bill Dante had done.

Dante had committed the unpardonable sin. To save himself, he had doomed his partner to almost certain death. Yet, for a long while, O'Hara felt no stirring of hatred—only that dull wonder.

It was dark outside, and so he knew it was night. He had scratched a match to see the cave's interior, and now he scratched a second match, as he felt for his watch, to see what time it was. But the watch was gone, probably lost in his wild tumble down the hillside.

He got up, went to the cave entrance and stood listening. But he heard only the wind. Apparently the wolves had remained on the ridge, devouring the horse, unaware of his proximity. He was safe from them in the cave.

But he couldn't stay here. He had no food, and already he felt a gnawing hunger. And it would be certain death to try to travel in the dark. He lay back down on the cave floor, numb and shivering, to await daylight.

Bill Dante, he guessed, would make it. The wolves would stop to gorge themselves on O'Hara's horse, giving Bill his chance—the chance he had been willing to kill for. Bill had a slick tongue too. He would think of some plausible tale to account for Wick O'Hara's disappearance. Everybody would believe him, including Rose, and likely Bill would marry Rose. In the spring he would come back into the mountains after the small fortune in gold they had left cached at their cabin, because it would have slowed them.

Just remembering Rose Tully kindled a warmness inside Wick O'Hara. From the first, he hadn't given himself much chance against handsome, swaggering Bill Dante.

But that hadn't kept him from loving Rose, nor from being Bill Dante's friend. Not that Rose, who owned Caribou's only hotel, had ever lavished more smiles on Bill than on him. It was just that a girl like Rose falling in love with a lanky, red-haired, awkward gent like him, when Bill was about, would have been incongruous.

Her marrying Bill Dante had seemed kind of fitting and natural. Now, however, that was suddenly changed. Bill Dante had proved himself a treacherous, cowardly skunk, unfit to get within a mile of Rose!

Daylight was seeping through the stacked boulders when he again roused himself fully. Just getting up was an agonizing task, for his whole body was stiff from the cold and his bruises. He didn't notice being hungry, but he was thirsty. He pulled loose the rocks at the cave entrance, making a hole big enough to crawl through, and scooped up handfuls of snow and ate it.

The blizzard still raged. The cave he saw was in the wall of a shallow canyon. Nearby was a clump of jackpine saplings. He fought his way to the thicket, gouging about in the snow until he uncovered an armful of dead branches. He made several trips, piling the wood in the cave. Then, with ironlike fingers, he kindled a fire. He hunkered half-dead over the blaze, feeling the heat soak like a benediction through his body.

For two more days and nights the blizzard screamed its insane fury. Then suddenly it was gone, and Wick O'Hara stood outside the cave blinking his eyes in brilliant sunshine. A bitter wind still trumpeted among the gleaming white peaks. The world about him was incredibly bright and beautiful. But underneath this barbaric splendor, he knew, lay stark and relentless death.

He recognized half a dozen landmarks. He knew just where Caribou lay, off to the northeast. The well-nigh impossible task would be getting there, afoot, without food, faced with countless unseen perils. He floundered out of the canyon, gaining a ridge that had been swept almost clean of snow. And then, knowing the odds against him, Wick O'Hara struck for the lowlands. . . .

A LESSER man, driven by a lesser purpose, would have left his bones to bleach in the Whitebears. But it was more than just self preservation that kept Wick O'Hara alive through three torturing days and nights and brought him, finally, to the town of Caribou.

He came, a gaunt ghost of a man, reeling along like a drunken cowboy between the two rows of frame buildings. His mind was numb, from exhaustion, from the savage cold, from the pain of scores of cuts and bruises on his body. But one fixed purpose was clear—to find Bill Dante.

He stumbled past Rose's two-story hotel, the Denver House, without pause. Lights blazed in the lower rooms, he noticed, and a great amount of noise came from the place. He thought he heard music, and gay laughter, but he wasn't sure. If Bill Dante were here in Caribou he probably would be in the ornate Great Northern Saloon.

He stumbled as he reached for the door, and almost fell into the room. He braced himself and stared about the big, ornately furnished barroom. The place was quiet, where usually it was roistering, and held less than half a dozen men. These men stared as if seeing a man from the grave.

"Wick O'Hara!" somebody said.

Bill Dante was not among the men.

O'Hara shuffled stiff-legged to the bar. The room was spinning before his eyes. The fat bartender, known as "Porky," was looking at him with cold, expressionless eyes.

"Whisky," O'Hara said hoarsely. Then, when Porky didn't move or speak: "Whisky, blast yuh—and hurry!"

"I'm out of whisky," Porky said, and spat.

O'Hara stared at him stupidly. His gaze shifted to the rows of bottles behind the bar. He didn't try to understand what this meant. The anger that exploded inside him had been there for long, tortuous hours. He smashed a fist into Porky's fat face.

The blow was weak, but it knocked the bartender from his stool and to the floor behind the bar. He yelled, cursed shrilly, and came up clutching a sawed-off scattergun.

The blow had taken most of O'Hara's remaining strength. He clung to the bar, breathing hard, trying to understand this. Porky was still cursing as he swung the gun-muzzle around.

"Drop her, Porky," a voice blared, "or I'll make cold sidemeat out of yuh!"

Porky dropped the scattergun.

Wick O'Hara hadn't heard the door open, but now a runty, gnarled little oldster, clad in buckskins and with gray hair falling over his collar, pranced across to the bar. The bandy-legged oldster was "Yellowstone", Peaks, and he was O'Hara's friend. He had a long-barreled old pistol in his hand.

"Howdy, Wick," Yellowstone said. "By grabs, when I saw yuh on the street just now I thought yuh had a snootful, but now I see that's just what yuh need." He jiggled the gun at Porky. "Set her out, yuh fat hog—a whole bottle!"

Porky set out a bottle, and O'Hara drank deeply. The whisky sent warmth and fresh strength surging through him. Yellowstone looked at him critically.

"Waugh! Yuh look like yuh'd been chawed up and spit out a couple times, then run over by a herd of buffalo. Porky, yuh tub of lard, trot out some grub!"

Scowling, Porky went into a back room. The others in the saloon hadn't moved or

spoken, except among themselves. They were watching Wick O'Hara with a queer, hostile intensity.

"Yuh seen Bill Dante?" Wick asked casually.

Yellowstone squinted. "Shore. Not over twenty minutes ago. Yuh want to see him?"

"Where is he?" O'Hara countered.

"Why, up at the Denver House, like most everybody else."

"What's happenin' there?"

"A dance. Or more rightly, I hear, a kind of engagement party for Bill Dante and Rose Tully."

O'Hara drank again from the bottle. Then Porky brought some kind of hot food and placed it before him, and he ate slowly, not so ravenously hungry as he had thought, thinking about what Yellowstone had said.

Yellowstone watched him, lips pursed thoughtfully, and stayed quiet. Finally O'Hara pushed back his plate.

"Loan me yore gun," he said.

Yellowstone gave him the old pistol.

"Where yuh headed?"

"The Denver House," O'Hara said, and went out into the street.

He didn't feel the bitter snap of the wind as he went along the street toward the brightly lighted Denver House. Strength had flowed back into his body. Now he knew the utter wickedness of Bill Dante's act.

He paused briefly at a window, face close against the glass pane, and peered into the big front room of the hotel. The room was brightly lighted. Two glowing stoves gave heat. An oldster played a fiddle and a tow-headed cowboy an accordion. Laughing couples circled the room in a waltz. A table held a huge basin of chokeberry wine and piles of doughnuts.

O'Hara's gaze focused almost instantly on one couple—Bill Dante and Rose Tully. Bill's arm was about Rose's slim waist possessively, and she was smiling up into his face. Bill looked like a picture out of a book in his fancy clothes. They made a handsome couple.

Wick O'Hara's bitter resentment was like a dark weight inside him. He went on to the door, pushed it open and stepped inside. His coat was open, Yellowstone's old gun in his waist-band.

A woman saw his wild, haggard figure first, and she simply stopped, halting her partner, and stared in shocked, wide-eyed silence. Her partner looked.

"Wick O'Hara, by gosh!" he mumbled. Then in a louder, shrill tone, "Wick O'Hara!"

The music, the laughter and talk all stopped abruptly, as if a faucet had been turned. The room got quiet, with all eyes riveted on O'Hara. As if they were looking at a dead man, he thought.

Bill Dante and Rose stood a little apart from the others. Rose was pale, a kind of shocked unbelief in her blue eyes as she stared at Wick. Dante's face had turned a sickly gray, his lips drawn tautly over his teeth in a startled grimace.

In the silence, O'Hara said calmly:

"Bill, I've come back. Yuh're a filthy skunk, and I aim to kill yuh—here and now!"

A woman screamed, and there was a quick scuffling of feet as the crowd moved back. Some ran out through doorways. Rose Tully moved quickly, throwing her slender body in front of Dante.

"Don't, Wick!" she cried wildly. "Whatever you've done, you can't commit murder before a whole roomful of people!"

"Killin' him wouldn't be murder!" O'Hara said flatly. "Stand aside, Rose. Bill, if yuh've got an ounce of nerve stand out and draw yore gun!"

Dante pushed Rose aside. He spread his arms.

"I'm not armed, Wick. Kill me, and yuh'll hang!"

Dante had told the truth. He was coatless, without belt or gun.

"Get a gun," O'Hara said, "or I'll shoot yuh down like a dog!"

"He's crazy mad—he'll kill us all!" a woman shrilled. "Why don't somebody do something?"

"Go away, Wick," Rose pleaded, her face white. "Why did you come here? Why do you want to kill Bill?"

"Because he needs killin'. Because he ain't fit to mingle with decent folks. Ask him what happened in the mountains."

"He's already told us," a townsman said grimly.

"About how we found gold in the Whitebears?" O'Hara asked. "About how a landslide covered our grub, and how we had to hit for the outside, trailed by a pack of hungry wolves?"

"Yeah! And how, when the wolves closed in, yuh shot his hoss down, leavin' him to the white devils, so's yuh could save yore own mangy hide!"

Wick O'Hara stood still a moment, shocked into silence. Now he understood what had happened in the Great Northern. In that instant he felt no anger, only a numbing stupefaction at Dante's cunning ruthlessness.

"Listen," he said carefully. "Dante lied to yuh. It was him that shot my hoss, leavin' me to the wolves. I rolled down a hillside, and somehow found a cave to crawl into, and got away from 'em. I stayed there three days and nights, and when the blizzard stopped I started out afoot. I thought I'd die, and lots of times I almost did. But I made it. Bill Dante was my partner, but he double-crossed me."

Somebody sniggered, and the derisive

sound spread among the men. O'Hara seemed to freeze solid inside. They didn't believe him—they believed Bill Dante! Dante had foreseen the possibility that he, Wick, might escape the wolves and return to Caribou and he had paved the way with a diabolical lie. A voice seemed to come from a vast distance:

"Bill Dante staggered into town three days ago. He was in a bad way, from three days and nights of fightin' the blizzard and mountains and the wolves. It was a miracle he made it. He wouldn't have if the wolves hadn't stopped to eat his hoss, and that gave him a good start. It was a slick trick, O'Hara, layin' out several days, then killin' yore own hoss and reelin' into town afoot and tryin' to put the blame onto Bill. But I reckon we done got the straight of it."

"Yuh believe that's the way it happened?" O'Hara asked dazedly.

They stared at him, silent, without warmth.

DANTE had regained his arrogance and confidence. He smiled, shrugged, shook his head with a fake regret.

"I'm sorry, Wick. When I showed up alone, the shape I was in, I had to tell the truth. I hoped yuh wouldn't come back here."

O'Hara's rage returned, like a red explosion inside him, and he lunged suddenly forward, smashing savagely at Dante's face. He was still weak, but the blow rocked Dante, bringing blood to his lips. Dante swore viciously, caught his balance and slid in close to O'Hara, driving upward with his hard fists.

He beat the gaunt, weakened Wick O'Hara backward to the floor. Stunned, O'Hara swayed to his knees, to his feet. But as he tried to lunge forward again, half a dozen men caught him and held him helpless.

Dimly he saw Rose Tully before him. She was staring at him, but he couldn't fathom what lay in her eyes.

"You, Rose," he asked hoarsely. "Do you believe what they say?"

"Wick, I—I—" she murmured, then she turned abruptly away, losing herself in the crowd.

"Yuh had friends hereabouts, Wick, a lot of friends," he heard a voice say grimly. "That's why we're lettin' yuh go—why we're not usin' a rope on yuh. But if I was you I'd get out of town, and I'd stay gone!"

They had taken the old gun, and now they released his arms. There was a cold fury in his eyes as he looked at Bill Dante, but he spoke quite calmly.

"Yore pot, Bill. But I'll take the last one, the big one, and yore life will be in it!"

He turned, stalked between rows of silent, grim-eyed men and out into the windy street.

CHAPTER III

Clue to Treachery

YELLOWSTONE Peaks fell into step beside O'Hara. Yellowstone had heard and seen what happened.

"The dumb, knuckle-headed hogs!" he growled. "Ain't got the brains of a porkypine. Come along to my cabin, younker."

Wick O'Hara needed no urging. He was bewildered, exhausted, a little sick. He needed rest, and a chance to think.

Yellowstone's cabin huddled under a bluff a mile north of Caribou. There the oldster kindled a fire and made a thick beef broth, which O'Hara ate.

"What happened up yonder?" Yellowstone asked then.

O'Hara told him. The runty oldster swore heartily.

"Never did trust that Bill Dante varmit. When he showed up, alone, and spun that cock-and-bull yarn about how yuh'd shot his bronc and left him to the wolves, I knowed it was a skunky lie. Reckon I was the only one as didn't believe him, though. He's got a tongue slick as the inside of a lard bucket. The whole town's been lickin' his boots, and cussin' you."

"Yuh say he showed up afoot?"

"And half-starved, seemed like. Mebbe his bronc fell into a canyon soon after he left you, settin' him afoot. Mebbe he was slick enough to kill the hoss after he'd got to the edge of the mountains, and put on an act. He had to get rid of the animal, to make his story stick, didn't he?"

O'Hara nodded wearily. He lay back on Yellowstone's bunk, and was almost instantly asleep. Yellowstone pulled blankets over him.

"The jug-headed ijits!" he muttered.

He paced the floor awhile, thinking. Then he donned his bearskin coat, which enveloped him from head to foot, and left the cabin.

He went straight to the Denver House. The dance had broken up, and the big front room was empty except for a night clerk.

"Rose?" he said, in answer to Yellowstone's question. "She's upstairs. But I don't reckon she'd want to see yuh. She's got company."

"Who?"

"Bill Dante!' The clerk grinned knowingly.

"Waugh!" Yellowstone snorted. "I reckon she'll talk to me."

He climbed a stairway at the back of the

room and went along a corridor that was dimly lighted by a lamp bracketed to the wall. He knew this place. Rose's living quarters, consisting of three simply furnished rooms, were near the front of the second story. Light seeped from under one of the doors.

Yellowstone lifted a hand to rap on the door. But he didn't. He stood still, head cocked, listening.

In the room, he heard Rose Tully's voice say:

"I don't know whether you or Wick O'Hara lied. Maybe I don't care! The point is, I don't know whether you could find that cabin where the gold's cached, either."

"I can find it, easy," he heard Dante say, his voice faintly ironical. "That's a side to you I hadn't seen, Rose—refusin' to say yuh'll marry me till yuh're shore I've got a lot of gold. I didn't know yuh was greedy."

"Didn't you? I just want to be sure, that's all. This is a harsh land, Bill, you know that. I'm tired of looking out for drunks, and having men leer at me."

Yellowstone lowered his hand. He dropped to one knee and, without compunction, looked through the key-hole. He could see Rose, sitting in a chair, her slim body straight and rigid. There was a hardness to her face, her eyes, that he had never before seen. He could only see Bill Dante's shiny boots, as Dante stretched his long legs out toward a glowing stove.

"What yuh want me to do?" Dante asked.

"Why, that's up to you," Rose said. "Wick O'Hara doublecrossed you. It seems to me he forfeited any rights he had to the gold."

"Not if he gets back up there first."

"That's what I mean. If it were my gold, tomorrow I'd start getting ready for a trip into the Whitebears."

"I don't know about that. Snowslides, snow-filled pits and canyons, mebbe wolves. It'd be dangerous."

"Of course it would! But wouldn't a pack-horse loaded with gold be worth a little danger? Besides, if you wait, Wick O'Hara's liable to beat you to it. He's been run out of town, but don't think he's licked! Wick's not the kind to quit!"

"By gosh, mebbe yuh're right," Dante agreed. "But I couldn't go alone. I'd have to have help. Two men ought to be plenty. And I know just the two for the job—Tebe Jacks and Baldy Knabb. We'll get things ready tomorrow, and pack out the next day. A pack animal for the gold, two more for grub, and blankets for the three of us."

"Four," Rose said calmly.

"How's that?"

"I'm going! No, don't argue, Bill. I'm so tired of it here that I want to get away for a while. I'll close the place for a few days—maybe forever—and we'll head into the mountains after the gold. Why shouldn't I go along? Doesn't it mean as much to me as it does to you? Remember, I promised to marry you—if we get the gold, if everything works out like you say. The promise stands only if you let me go with you."

Dante was quiet a moment, then said:

"All right, Rose."

YELLOWSTONE PEAKS backed away from the door, went back down the stairs and headed for his cabin, muttering angrily. He had thought a lot of Rose Tully, had thought it would be fine if she and Wick O'Hara got married. Now he was all mixed up.

He dallied for some time, debating whether to wake O'Hara and tell him what he had heard. Deciding against it, he was getting ready for bed when a light knock sounded on the cabin door. When he opened it, Rose Tully stood there, shrouded in a bearskin coat, and with a fur cap pulled over her yellow hair.

Yellowstone gaped.

"She knows I listened at the key-hole," he thought wildly. "She aims to raise thunder about it!"

Rose stepped past him into the cabin. She stood a moment, looking at Wick O'Hara on the bunk, and now there wasn't any hardness in her eyes or face.

"I thought he would be here," she murmured. "But I wanted to be sure. He was so weak . . . Take care of him, will you, Yellowstone?"

She turned abruptly and left the cabin.

Yellowstone gulped a couple of times.

"Blasted she-males!" he spluttered. "Sometimes I don't savvy 'em a-tall!"

Next morning, Yellowstone told Wick O'Hara of the conversation he had overheard between Bill Dante and Rose. He didn't tell about Rose coming to the cabin later, however. O'Hara listened with taut, impassive face, not letting Yellowstone see how hard the news hit him.

"What yuh aim to do about it?" Yellowstone asked anxiously.

"Yellowstone," Wick asked, "could yuh rustle me a hoss, and a pack animal, and enough provisions to last a man several days?"

The oldster grinned wickedly. "Two hosses, and enough grub to last two men several days. Yeah! You'll mebbe need help. Tebe Jacks and Baldy Knabb are bad ones, and they'll side Bill Dante if they're gettin' paid for it."

"All right," O'Hara said.

Knowledge of Rose's seeming willingness to side Bill Dante against him, lay like a dark weight inside him. But there was more—a sharp eagerness to get Dante back in the Whitebears.

"Bill tried for a show-down up there," he said, "and now that's where he'll get it!"

He remained impatiently in the cabin all

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that day, while old Yellowstone prowled the settlement, buying horses and a grub pack and spying on Bill Dante. The clear weather held, but it was still bitterly cold with a strong wind blowing.

That night O'Hara and Yellowstone packed out, following an icy creek up into the low timbered hills overlooking Caribou. There, from a spot where they could see the twinkling lights of the town in the shadowlands below, they made camp. They were warm enough in their sleeping bags, with the fir and pine trees pointing like moving dark fingers against a brilliant sky. At dawn they saw a tiny cavalcade leave Caribou and begin the climb up into the snow-clad highlands.

Bill Dante, Rose, Tebe Jacks and "Baldy" Knabb, with their pack-horses, passed within a mile of O'Hara and Yellowstone. They watched as Dante's party crossed a spiny ridge and vanished from sight. Then they, too, mounted and headed up.

They didn't try to stay within sight of those ahead. Their trail was plain in the snow, and O'Hara didn't want Bill Dante to suspect they were being followed. Occasionally, through the day, they glimpsed Dante's party—dark specks lined against a higher peak, or crawling slowly along a bare ridge.

* * * * *

At dusk Dante called a halt and they made camp in the lee of towering walls that served as a windbreak. Rose was tired, her slender body aching from the day's hard climb. She sat with her back to the wall, a blanket wrapped about her, and watched the men as they made ready for the night.

Tebe Jacks and Baldy Knabb did most of the work. Jacks was a lanky, slab-bodied man with muddy gray eyes. Knabb was stocky, fat-faced, bald. Rose knew them only as a couple of toughs who loafed about the Caribou saloons, apparently never working. Each had killed at least one man. But Bill Dante treated them with arrogant contempt.

After they had eaten, Rose asked:

"How much farther?"

"Two more days, mebbe a little less," Dante said. "We're makin' good time."

"You're sure you can find the cabin?"

"Dead easy." Dante grinned. "Anxious to get a look at that yellow stuff, ain't yuh?"

Rose shrugged. "It's just that everything up here is so—well, so alike."

"Not if yuh've been here before. Any time I look up I see half a dozen landmarks that tell me right where I am." He pointed. "See that wedge-shaped peak over there? Right at the foot of it is where Wick O'Hara shot my hoss and rode on leavin' me to the wolves—he thought. We'll pass it sometime tomorroy."

"Bill," Rose said slowly, "I want to see the spot."

Dante hesitated. "Why?"

She shrugged again. "Curiosity, I suppose."

"All yuh'll see would be the bones of a hoss, what the wolves couldn't get loose and carry off. I reckon they even chewed up the saddle leather and swallered it."

"Anyway, I want to see it," Rose insisted. "Maybe because on that spot Wick O'Hara stopped being a man and became something else. Why don't you want me to see it, Bill?"

DANTE looked at her thoughtfully. He had told the truth. Nothing would remain except a few bones, maybe part of the saddle, gnawed to shreds—nothing that could incriminate him, nothing that could possibly be recognized as belonging to O'Hara. He thought of his own horse, which he had shot and let fall into a deep canyon far below. He grimaced, remembering the misery he had gone through to make his story believable.

"Why, shore, Rose," he agreed. "I'll show yuh the place. We'll pass close to it anyhow."

At dawn they renewed the climb. The wind still blew with a trumpetlike sound across the heights, buffeting the pine and aspen that clung, like gaunt and twisted old women, to the higher ridges. For the most part they kept to the backbones of rock, for the hollows were deep with snow. These trenches were roadways for deadly snowslides that streamed like monstrous white snakes between the ridges, and thundered and bellowed into the lowlands.

The wedge-shaped peak drew in toward them slowly. It was mid-afternoon when they climbed the bare ridge at the base of the peak. Bill Dante had led them unerringly to the spot where, on that dark and chaotic day a week and a half ago, he had shot Wick O'Hara's horse and watched it fall.

Things were as he had pictured them to Rose. The skeleton of a horse, lying near the rim of the ridge that had been swept almost clear of snow by the fierce wind, gnawed clean of every shred of meat and hide. The metal parts of a saddle. Forty feet from the skeleton, the edge of the ridge dropped away steeply into a deep ravine.

The four dismounted, stretching their tired limbs. Tebe Jacks and Baldy Knabb looked briefly and with scant interest at the bones, then drew aside and squatted in the lee of a big boulder, talking in low tones. Dante rolled and lit a cigarette, watching Rose as she walked slowly about the vicinity.

"Wick was right over yonder when he turned and shot my hoss," he said, frowning as if trying to reconstruct the picture in his mind. He was, in fact, trying to picture just how O'Hara had escaped this death-trap. "It was snowin' hard, and when my hoss fell I rolled down into that ravine. That's how I got away from the wolves."

"Where's the cave?" Rose asked abruptly.

[Turn page]

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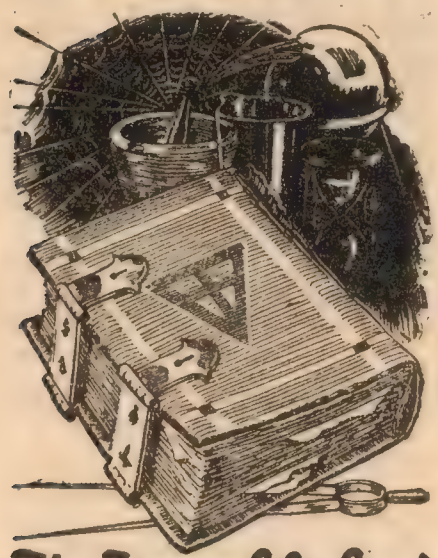

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Dante looked sharply at her. "There wasn't any cave. That was somethin' Wick made up. Some time that night, though, I found a crevice and crawled into it and slept some."

Rose had stooped and taken something from the ground, near the rim of the ravine. She turned slowly and faced Bill Dante.

"I tricked you, Bill," she said softly. "I never wanted to go to the cabin where the gold is cached. I wanted to come here, to this spot, because I was almost certain, from the start, that you'd lied when you said Wick O'Hara shot your horse and left you to die. I believed Wick was telling the truth. But I had to be absolutely sure. So I tricked you into bringing me here, in the wild hope I might find something that would tell me the truth. And I have."

Dante had got very still.

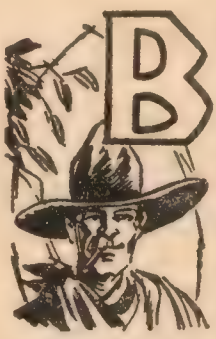
"Have you gone crazy, Rose?" he said. "It happened just like I said."

Suddenly there was furious anger in the girl's eyes. She held out her hand, palm up.

"Then how did Wick O'Hara's watch get there on the ground?" she demanded.

CHAPTER IV

Blood on the Snow



BILL DANTE'S gaze shifted to the object in Rose's hand—a big silver watch. He knew the watch. It had Wick O'Hara's initials engraved on its back. There was no denying it was O'Hara's watch. He knew also, with cold certainty, that there was no further use of denying anything.

He dragged deeply at his cigarette, then tossed it away without taking his gaze from Rose's face, his own eyes gone suddenly cold and wicked.

"So now yuh know," he murmured. "Wick O'Hara didn't shoot my hoss—I shot his. He must have dropped the watch when he slammed into that boulder. I'm sorry, Rose."

"Sorry!" she said, with bitter scorn. "You'd do the same thing over again! You tried to kill Wick, and when you saw you'd failed, you tried to make an outcast of him. And you say you're sorry!"

"I didn't mean that," Dante said coldly. "I wish the wolves had got him. I meant, I'm sorry you had to find out. Yuh can see what might happen to me if others found out the truth, can't yuh?"

She knew what he meant, knew suddenly the utter wickedness of the man, and her face paled slightly. Tebe Jacks and Baldy Knabb had straightened, stepped away from the boulder. They watched silently, looking from

Dante to the girl. Rose looked at them with sudden wild hope.

"Now you know what Bill Dante is—you know what he did!" she cried. "Why don't you do something?"

But they didn't move. They even grinned a little, and then she knew there was full understanding between the two and Dante.

"We been offered good money to do a job," Jacks drawled. "If somethin' happened to Bill before the job was finished, we might not get paid."

"I'm sorry," Dante said again, still softly. "I loved yuh, Rose—I still do—but I love my own life a lot more. . . . Better tie her up, boys."

Still grinning, Jacks and Knabb started toward her. She whirled suddenly and darted at her horse. But they leaped after her. She was almost in the saddle when they seized her and dragged her back to the ground.

There was a quick, scrambling sound, and Wick O'Hara's gaunt figure came clawing up out of the ravine and onto the ridge. He had a long-barreled pistol in his hand.

"Turn her loose, quick, or I'll kill yuh!" he spat harshly.

But instead of releasing her, they shoved her forward, both of them trying to crowd behind her to use her body as a shield, both of them clawing clumsily with mittened hands for their guns. Not daring to risk a shot, O'Hara lunged forward, slashing at their heads with his clubbed gun. Bill Dante had turned and leaped for the shelter of a boulder.

O'Hara's slashing gun caught Jacks on the head and knocked him to his knees. The girl's horse, frightened, snorted and whirled, its rump hitting Knabb and knocking him away from the girl. She stumbled, went to her knees.

Dante had gained the shelter of the boulder, and now he jabbed his gun across it and fired. But Wick O'Hara's sudden appearance had rattled him, and he missed, the bullet plucking at the sleeve of O'Hara's sheepskin coat. He whirled, slammed a bullet at Dante, and as Dante ducked out of sight, he wheeled back and seized Rose about the waist and half-dragged her toward the rim of the ravine.

On the very edge of the snow-filled ravine was a barrel-sized boulder—the one he had rolled against when his horse had fallen that other day. He pulled Rose behind this boulder, intending to crouch there for shelter. But a portion of the ledge crumbled and they both sprawled forward, rolling down the decline. They rolled perhaps twenty feet, then brought up abruptly in a snow-filled crevice that slashed the ravine side.

They could hear Dante and the others shouting on the ridge above, could hear the

[Turn page]

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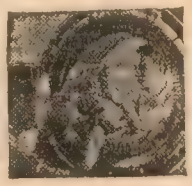

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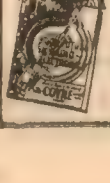

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shrill, bitter whine of the wind. O'Hara clawed to his knees, his gun still gripped in one hand, swiping snow from his eyes with the other. He looked upward—straight into the dark, malevolent face of Bill Dante. But before he could raise his gun, Dante ducked back.

"Tebe—Baldy—help me here!" he heard Dante yell. "Hurry—hurry!"

O'Hara started to rise out of the crevice, pulling Rose with him. Rose was looking upward.

"Look—the b o u l d e r!" she suddenly gasped.

THE boulder, directly above them, was trembling, moving! Dante meant to crush them under the huge rock! Suddenly the boulder slid over the rim and plummeted downward.

Frantically, pulling Rose with him, Wick O'Hara burrowed down into the snow that filled the crevice. He felt the earth tremble, he heard a rumbling, bellowing sound directly over him. Then the sound receded, and he knew that the hurtling boulder had jumped the crevice and plunged into the deep snow at the ravine's bottom.

O'Hara had left Yellowstone with the horses while he scouted on ahead. But now, dimly, somewhere on the ridge, he heard the runty oldster's bawling voice:

"Hang and rattle, younker! Here I come, lookin' for live bear meat to chaw on!"

Then he heard the brawling roar of Yellowstone's pistol. And other guns, obviously those of the three killers, took up the savage chorus.

"Stay here!" O'Hara said to Rose, and clawed out of the crevice and up the side of the ravine.

He felt the bitter, hostile slam of the hissing wind against him as he went over the sharp rim of the ridge.

Yellowstone Peaks had come onto the ridge farther down, and had denned up behind a jutting wall a hundred feet away, from where he was firing. Dante, Jacks and Knabb had taken refuge behind another huge boulder. Their backs were turned to O'Hara, as they fired at Yellowstone. But Jacks heard O'Hara as he came onto the ridge, and whirled, driving a shot at him.

Wick O'Hara shot the gaunt killer, and watched him sprawl forward on his face in the trampled snow.

Startled, Dante and Baldy Knabbs wheeled. They saw they were caught between the guns of O'Hara and Yellowstone, and slid away from the boulder, Knabb toward the horses and Dante, obviously rattled, darting toward the rim of the canyon.

"The last pot, Bill, the big one—remember?" O'Hara called jeeringly. "Yuh aim to

let me take it without even drawin' cards?"

Dante had reached the rim of the ravine. He glanced down its steep wall, then turned and ran hard along the rim. But at the sound of O'Hara's taunting voice, he stopped, wheeled and fired with incredible swiftness.

O'Hara felt the bullet slash hotly at his side. He stumbled, seeing Dante's face through a red mist, taut with the wild hope of survival. He braced himself, raised his gun and fired deliberately, again and again, feeling the gun's recoil, hearing its savage, pounding bellow.

For an instant, fogging gunsmoke hid Dante from view. Then the wind whipped away the smoke, and O'Hara saw Bill Dante again. Dante was swaying, his gun dangling loosely in his hand. He seemed to be looking thoughtfully, searchingly at the ground. Then Dante turned, as if he had forgotten Wick O'Hara, and walked straight over the rim of the ravine.

O'Hara heard a brief, clattering sound, like a miniature landslide—then silence.

The other guns had stopped. O'Hara turned, saw Yellowstone prancing toward him, smoking gun in hand. He saw Baldy Knabb, lying there on the ground near the horse he had been trying to mount when Yellowstone shot him.

Hearing another sound he turned back, and saw Rose Tully clamber onto the ridge and run toward him. She had lost her cap and her hair was streaming like a golden banner in the wind. Her eyes were wide with fear and shock.

"I saw—I heard something roll down into the canyon!" she stammered. "I was afraid . . . Oh, you're hurt!"

She dropped to the ground, pulling Wick O'Hara with her, her strong young arms holding him against her. Yellowstone Peaks came barging up, his bandy legs pumping furiously.

"Here, gal, let me see—"

He saw O'Hara look up at him, grinning, and wink.

Yellowstone grunted disgustedly, glowering at the gleaming white peaks about them.

"Faugh! One danged she-gal's worse'n a whole wolf pack. He's a goner for shore—but I reckon he's goin' to like it!"

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HAM AND THE SOUR KRAUTS

(Continued from page 57)

"You, and this fake Indian guide you tried to palm off on us, know too much," Lord Wilcox says coolly.

"Fake guide?"

Then the light dawns on me. That Ojibwa with his face wrapped in a cloth because of a toothache was Ham! But why? I don't get to reason any further.

"We can't let anything interfere with our plans," Lord Wilcox goes on. "Tomorrow we're going to dress you and this buffalo hunter in our clothes, and this fake guide in his. You'll meet with an accident. When they haul your decomposed bodies from the river, you'll be identified as us. We'll be safe in Hamburg by then."

"Germany?" I question. "You don't talk like no Heinies."

"Certainly not!" Lord Brawley cuts in. "That is why the syndicate—"

"I'll tell yuh, Egg," Ham cuts in. "These dudes represent a big Hun gem syndicate. Sapphires. Last year one of their prospectors found a huge sapphire deposit on Mort Clapp's range. More valuable than the sapphire diggin's in the Judith Basin, or the ones around Helena. These tinhorns was sent out to get it for a song. They knew Mort wouldn't sell his hard-earned homestead at any price. So they bought up his note, and figgered to break him by rustlin' his prize bulls and droppin' their carcasses into the old mine shaft. The cussed vultures!"

"Enough!" Wilcox snaps, threatening Ham with the butt of his rifle. "Serve our dinner. What have you?"

"Yore canned sauerkraut swill!" Ham bellows angrily. "And venison steak smothered with some of yore canned mushrooms."

The two fake lords eat a hearty meal. Brawley pulls the rolled blankets we thought was a sleeping man out of his sleeping bag, and turns in. Wilcox, his sporting rifle across his knees, sits against a stump, guarding us.

About midnight Wilcox commences to squirm. He gets up, kneading at his bread basket, as though he's got a powerful cramp. Brawley, who's been thrashing around in his sleep, also rises, plumb miserable with cramps. Their misery works fast. In five minutes both of them fake lords are helplessly writhing on the ground. Their loud moans echo in the canyon. Then they are quiet in a gasping hard-breathing silence.

"They'll cash in if we don't hurry," Ham says.

"I'm hurryin'." Buff wiggles toward Ham, who comes toward him as far as his chain will permit.

Ham quickly unties the old man, and in a minute he's slashing at my bonds. We find the key to the padlock on the chain around Ham's ankle in Lord Brawley's wallet. In less time than it takes to tell, we're all free.

"Quick!" Ham says, stirring some mustard into a pan of hot water. "Hold up his nibs. Open his mouth."

Like he's drenching a sheep, Ham pours the hot mustard water down Brawley's gullet. He gives Wilcox a dose of the same revolting medicine. We shake both men out of their stupor. They gag, retch, emptying their stomachs. By dawn they're pale and wan, and weak as kittens. But their mysterious seizure has left them.

"I'm plumb hungry," Buff declared. "Can't say I'd eat any of their danged sauerkraut, but this here venison and fancy mushrooms shore looks good!"

"Lay off!" Ham shouts, dashing the spoon from Buff's hand.

"Why?" I want to know.

"Them mushrooms are slightly adulterated with some toadstools I found back of this stump." Ham grins.

"Yuh knocked out these fellers with a mess of toadstools?" I gasp.

HAM grins some more.

"Shore," he says. "Them greedy Germans wasn't hard to fool."

"But—" I pin down Ham with my eye.

[Turn page]

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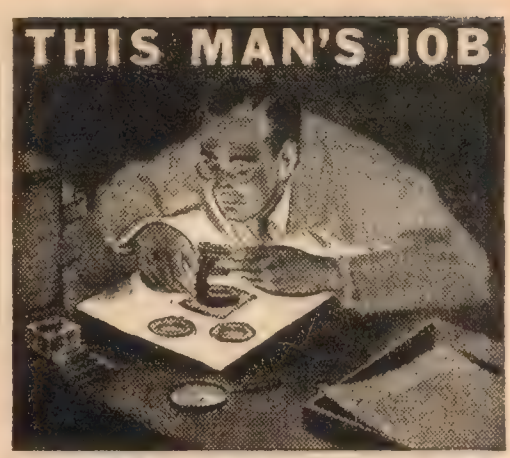

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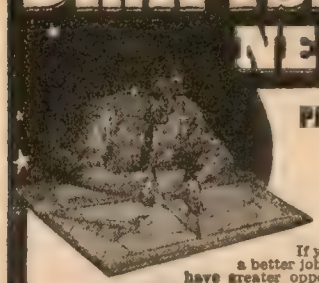

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"Come clean. How'd yuh ever get wise to the fakes in the first place?"

"That was easy," Ham replies. "When the Governor's letter come askin' us to find them two lords an Injun cook, I went down to the depot to look over their grub, which had arrived well in advance. They had included a case of canned sauerkraut."

"What of it?" Buff interrupts.

"Just this," Ham goes on. "Lots of Englishmen have hunted in these parts. But none of 'em ever et sauerkraut. I sort of smelled a rat. Things commenced to add up. Their wantin' a single Injun guide was fishy. Then it come out that a German syndicate had bought Mort's mortgage from the bank. If these fellers was German, why did they want to hunt on Mort's range? The easiest way to find out was to come along as their cook."

Ham looks kind of sheepish as he continues:

"They wasn't as dumb as I thought. The second day out, they jumped me, took away my clothes, and chained me up like a hound dog. I overheard 'em talkin' that you, Egg, was scoutin' the country. So I commenced floatin' chips with a warnin' wrote on 'em down the river."

"And took to cookin' sauerkraut with the lid off to guide him to the hide-out!" Buff grins in toothless admiration. "Well, Ham, we've shore made a rich man out of Mort Clapp!"

"We shore have," Ham agrees.

"Yuh think yuh could talk Mort into buyin' me a new hat?" Buff woefully fingers the bullet-hole in his old sky-piece. "Folks might think I was a careless scout and let an Apache sniper sneak up on me. I'm too old a man to have my reputation ruined."

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THE HOME CORRAL

(Continued from Page 8)

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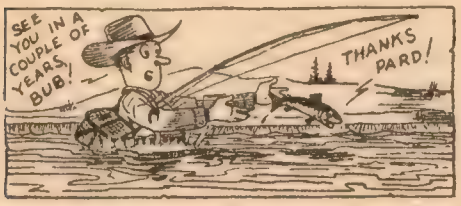
He knows the river and knows the runs where the big ones feed. Sometimes at the head of a pool, where water funnels through like a millrace. Sometimes in swirling eddies just below. Or in the dancing white crests midway down or even in the slick, shallow tail. Fish positions change according to time of day, height of the water, a thousand things.

A no-savvy hombre might angle for hours without finding the lucky spots, without knowing just how to offer that wisp of silk and hair and wool to the wily rainbow. An expert like Ely senses them in a way hard to put in words. It's a knowledge that's more like instinct.



Feeling his way, a step at a time along the treacherous bottom, he works his way out until his shirt pocket is almost dipping water. The waders reach nearly to armpits. A long cast, made with effortless ease. A flashing red rise, a strike and splash. The line jerks taut. The reel whirrs. The rod makes a half-circle.

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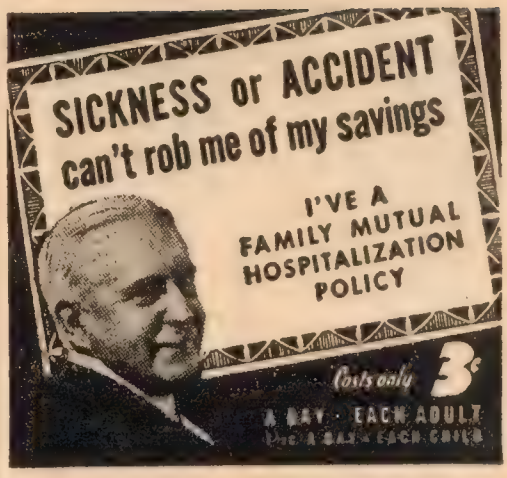
The logger is a resourceful man and accomplishes miracles of getting to difficult places with trucks and caterpillars and getting the logs out. No bridge to the timberland across the river? That doesn't stop him.

[*Turn Page*]



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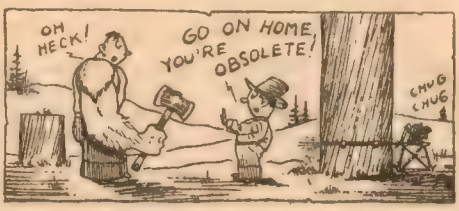
Cystex Helps Flush Kidneys

He bulldozes the approaches, builds a rock crib to hold the center span, then in some fashion that baffles bridge engineers lays huge logs across, binds them together with cable and there's your bridge. Or maybe he



merely stretches a 2½-inch cable across, ferrying equipment over, logs back.

More McKenzie boys have been killed in logging accidents than in the war. That gives you an idea.

Well, being used to heavy work with heavy equipment, I figured loggers would be the last to take to the delicate, exacting sport of fly-fishing. But there's a surprising lot of really fine fishermen among them. After a hard day in the woods, they've still got energy to go out at evening and do some fishing.

Hard Men to Stop

Yessir, these loggers are hard men to stop. For instance, there's Ed Nason.

About a year back Nason was dynamiting a stump. He lit a faulty fuse that burned in five seconds, instead of the expected

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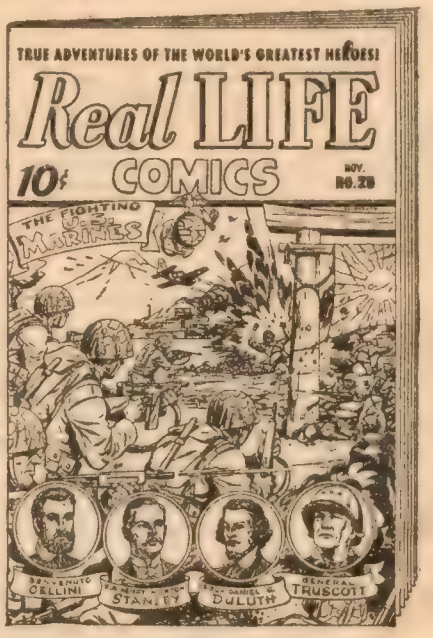

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seventy. Nason came out of the hospital with an empty sleeve—left arm a stub below the elbow.

He was rolling a smoke when I first met up with him. Curled the paper in the crook of that stub arm, poured in tobacco with the other, twisted it shut cowboy-style with his one hand.

Nason is out there of evenings, flipping a fly rod with the best of them. How does he manage it? He has a metal "hand" that can clamp onto rod, line or fly. He's cheerful and accepts his handicap as an entertaining new game that calls for doing things new ways. He's an educated man and once made a living with a typewriter.

"I hear they're making a typewriter for one-armed folks," he told me. "I used to be a good typist. Figure I can get back to sixty or seventy words a minute with this new rig. Might be useful some day—if I should really get bunged up. In the meantime, I'd rather work in the woods than anywhere else."

Past the McKenzie headwaters the highway makes a twisty climb to a 5300-foot summit. Snow-blocked until late June of this year. You sight glaciers and eternal snows. Past the summit the wet, green McKenzie country gives way to open forest. Tall, ponderous pines, sparse undergrowth.

In the McKenzie country ferns grow high enough to hide an automobile in the everlasting twilight under the firs.

East of the summit are low, scattered ground plants, mainly chemise. No great hanging masses of moss. But wildflowers in season—azalea, rhododendron, columbine, an endless variety. Game too—deer, bear, a few elk, and over on the rangeland sage hens and antelope. Many lakes.

Mild Climate

The McKenzie climate is mild. Warm, rainless summers, cool, wet winters. Yonder to the east, at the town of Bend and beyond, snow and sleet slash down on the lava plateaus. Out there are open miles, roadless miles of wilderness. Not much like the McKenzie country, with a piece of rich, forest ground, a view of the enchanting river and a garden patch and roses on the eaves. With pavement, telephone and electric wires to make life easier. And friendly neighbors just around the bend.

Oregon produces a hardy breed of men. The State had fewer physical rejections among Army draftees than any other. That's easy to understand when you see the wholesome

[*Turn Page*]

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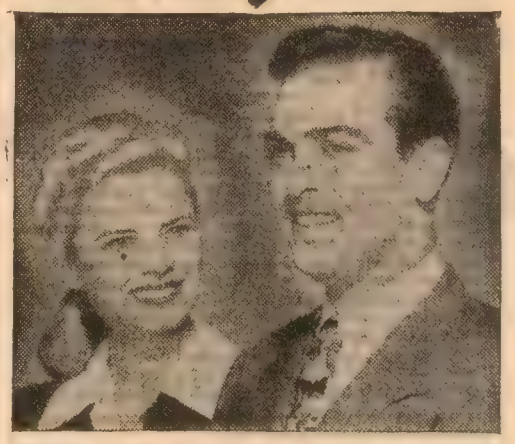

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—DOC LONG TRAIL.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

THEY were called "Doves of Peace" because things usually quieted down after they left town. There was no doubt that "Slick" Bradley and Sid Kane, trouble shooters for Amalgamated Mines, were a pair of salty hombres, so it was their job to clear up a difficult situation that developed in the silver mines down in New Mexico.

Sam Dawson was sent down there to take charge, and was just getting things ironed out when he was killed by a premature blast of dynamite. So Bradley and Kane arrived to see why the mines weren't working, and they found trouble as soon as they started talking to Curtis, the manager of the mines. The owner of the saloon they were in resented the two men chatting with Curtis in his place, and decided to do something about it!

That's the situation at the start of DOVES OF PEACE, the exciting novelet by Oscar J. Friend in the next issue of POPULAR WESTERN. And here's how the yarn goes on, as seen through Sid Kane's eyes:

He shifted then from being bartender to being bouncer. It was not a success. He did clap his ham of a hand on Slick's shoulder to hoist him out of his chair, but Slick grasped Curtis' glass and dashed the contents full in the bartender's face. The big fellow

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released his grip and staggered back, strangling and cursing.

Instantly the two gunslicks leaped forward, one on each side of Slick. The one nearest me had his gun out, lifted to bend it over Slick's head. Curtis shoved back his chair.

"Hold it, everybody!" I yelled.

Instead, the bartender immediately launched himself at me. The gun-thrower raised his arm for a chopping blow at Slick. I fired once from the hip, drilling the gun-flasher through the right shoulder and dropping him just before he reached Slick. The other man clutched at Slick, who uncoiled with the speed of a snapping spring and let drive his fist. It connected solidly with the fellow's nose, making a bloody ruin of his face and stretching him senseless.

The bartender's piglike eyes widened at sight of my gun, but he couldn't check his dive. I slapped him along the left temple with the gun-barrel and he collapsed to the floor with a whistling groan.

Bradley and Kane really go to work to prove that Sam Dawson was murdered, and they get the trouble cleared up so the mines can start producing again. How they do so makes DOVES OF PEACE a mighty entertaining yarn!

But that's not the only smashing novelet coming next issue. Sheriff Blue Steele and his deputy Shorty Watts match their wits and courage against some ruthless badmen in THE BORDER BRUTE, the fast-moving Painted Post novelet by Tom Gunn which is also featured.

There was a monster at large who went around crippling horses, and it was up to the sheriff to get the villain, and learn why other strange things were happening. Steele goes into action with guns roaring and it is a story that brings you the Sheriff of Painted Post at his fighting best.

Last but not least of the novelets in the next issue is THE TOWN TAMERS, by Larry Harris. Dan Drake helps Big Bill Keefer escape from prison because his wife is ill and needs him. But when they are riding some distance from the prison, Keefer suddenly announces that he is not going back to his wife—he has merely tricked Drake in order to get his help. And when Drake protests, Keefer ruthlessly knocks him out of the saddle, puts a bullet in him and leaves him for dead.

How Drake finally recovers and comes to the aid of Keefer's wife and child is told in this appealing story which swiftly mounts in dramatic tension when the escaped prisoner faces a showdown with the man he hates.

There will also be a grand assortment of shorter yarns of the sagebrush country in the next issue of POPULAR WESTERN, and Doc Trail has another HOME CORRAL de-

[Turn Page]

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OUR LETTER BOX

WE VALUE your opinions, and so we are eager to hear from more of our readers! Write and tell us what you think about POPULAR WESTERN. Tell us which stories you enjoyed most and about those that did not suit your fancy. We try to give you the best in Western fiction—and we want to know just what you like so that we can be guided accordingly.

Please address all your letters and postcards to The Editor, POPULAR WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

And now let's look over a few of the letters we have been receiving. Here's a challenge from a reader in Baltimore:

I have been reading POPULAR WESTERN for over two years now and think it is tops. Characters always seem real to me and I like to remember them by name. I'll bet that if I name some characters in this letter you can't tell me in which stories they appeared. I won't name Sheriff Blue Steele or Buffalo Billy Bates for what would be too easy—but how about some others? Let's try it.

"Red" Shannigan? Kit Madden? Jed Wilton? Jube Kurth? Fritzroy Lancelot? How about it, mister editor, can you tell me where they came from? —*Bob Clark, Baltimore, Md.*

Did you really think you would fool us on that one, Bob? "Red" Shannigan appeared in BOSS OF INDIAN BUTTE. Kit Madden in DEAD OUTLAW'S BOOTS. Jed Wilson in LAWMAN'S MISSION. Sheriff Jube Kurth in AZTEC TRIGGERS. Fitzroy Lancelot in THE BULLETIN OF BULLETS. There you are—and thanks for your letter, Bob.

Here's a letter in which the reader certainly knows what he doesn't like:

The present issue of POPULAR WESTERN is the best you have turned out in some time, but you spoil it with that rubbish about Buffalo Billy Bates. I read most of the Westerns and consider that author the worst that writes for any of them.—*A. W. Bell, Vineland, N. J.*

We welcome your opinion, Mr. Bell, but we must point out that a lot of our readers don't agree with you. For instance:

I am a regular reader of POPULAR WESTERN and I find every issue very interesting. I like the Sheriff Blue Steele and Buffalo Billy Bates stories best.—*Juanita Patch, Kelliher, Minn.*

Thanks for your letter, Juanita. That's about all for now—but thanks to the hundreds of other readers who have written us swell letters and let's hear from more of you! See you all next issue.

—THE EDITOR.

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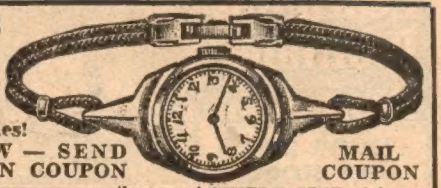


Watches, Games, Billfolds other personal and household premiums now easily yours! SIMPLY GIVE pictures with White CLOVERINE Brand SALVE for chaps and mild burns sold at 25 cents a box (with colorful picture) and remit amounts asked under premium wanted in catalog sent with order postage paid. OUR 50th YEAR. 1 to 3 boxes sold many homes. Mail coupon now! Wilson Chem. Co., Dept. 31-A, Tyrone, Pa.

PREMIUMS OR CASH GIVEN

SEND NO MONEY NOW

SEND NAME AND ADDRESS

Ladies! Glass Dinner Sets sent express collect, Ouija Boards, Games, Telescopes, and other personal and household premiums sent postage paid. SIMPLY GIVE pictures with White CLOVERINE Brand SALVE at 25 cents a box (with picture) and remit amounts asked under premium wanted in catalog sent with order. Mail coupon now!

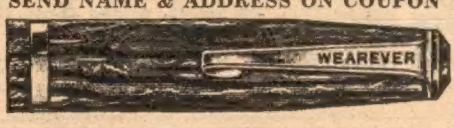
Wilson Chem. Co., Dept. 31-B, Tyrone, Pa.

Premiums OR CASH GIVEN

SEND NAME & ADDRESS ON COUPON

Boys - Girls - Ladies! SEND NO MONEY NOW

Fountain Pens, Mechanical Pencils, Telescopes, other personal and household premiums easily yours! SIMPLY GIVE pictures with White CLOVERINE Brand SALVE for chaps and mild burns sold at 25 cents a box (with picture) and remit amounts asked under premium wanted in catalog.



50th Year

Wilson Chem. Co., Dept. 31-C, Tyrone, Pa.

Premiums OR CASH GIVEN

SEND NAME & ADDRESS

Boys - Girls! Billfolds, and other personal and household premiums easily yours!

Simply Give picture with White Cloverine Brand Salve at 25c a box (with picture) and remit amounts asked under premium wanted in catalog. Mail coupon now!

Send No Money Now

Wilson Chemical Co., Dept. 31-D, Tyrone. Pa.

Our 50th Year

Sold thru Agents & Drug Stores

PREMIUMS Or Cash Given

Watches, Flashlights, Rings, School Boxes, other premiums easily yours! SIMPLY GIVE pictures with White CLOVERINE Brand SALVE for chaps, sold at 25c a box (with picture) and remit amounts called for under premium wanted in catalog. Mail coupon now!

Send No Money Now

Wilson Chem. Co. Dept. 31-E, Tyrone, Pa.

MAIL COUPON NOW

Wilson Chem. Co., Dept. TG-31, Tyrone, Pa.. Date.....
Gentlemen:—Please send me on trial to start twelve colorful art pictures with twelve boxes White CLOVERINE Brand SALVE to sell at 25c a box (with picture). I will remit amounts asked within 30 days, select a premium or keep a cash commission as fully explained under premium wanted in catalog sent with order, postage paid.

Name ..... Age.....

St. ..... RD.....Box.....

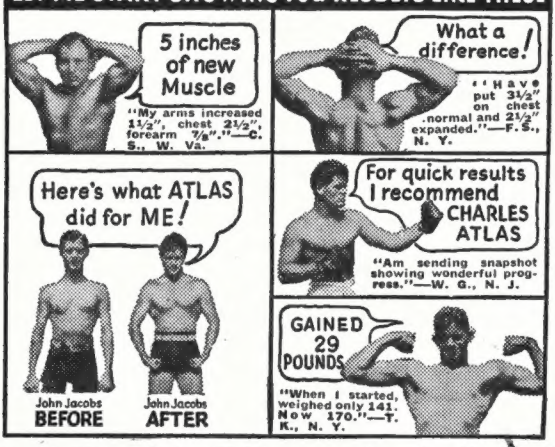
Town.....Zone No..... State.....

Print Last Name Here

Paste coupon on postal card or mail in an envelope today

Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a *New Man?*

LET ME START SHOWING YOU RESULTS LIKE THESE


5 inches of new Muscle
"My arms increased 1½", chest 2½", forearm ⅞"."—C. S., W. Va.
What a difference!
"Have put 3½" on chest normal and 2½" expanded."—F. S., N. Y.
Here's what ATLAS did for ME!
John Jacobs BEFORE
John Jacobs AFTER
For quick results I recommend CHARLES ATLAS
"Am sending snapshot showing wonderful progress."—W. G., N. J.
GAINED 29 POUNDS
"When I started, weighed only 141. Now 170."—T. K., N. Y.

CHARLES ATLAS

This is a recent photo of Charles Atlas showing how he looks today. This is not a studio picture but an actual untouched snapshot.

Awarded the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" in international contest—in competition with ALL men who would consent to appear against him.

Here's What Only 15 Minutes a Day Can Do For You

I DON'T care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

What's My Secret?

"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give you no gadgets or contraptions to fool with. When you have learned to develop your strength through **"Dynamic Tension"** you can laugh at artificial muscle-makers. You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own God-given body — watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real solid MUSCLE.

My method—**"Dynamic Tension"**—will turn the trick for you. No theory — every exercise is practical. And, man, so easy! Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of **"Dynamic Tension"** almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.

FREE BOOK

"Everlasting Health and Strength"

In it I talk to you in straight-from - the - shoulder language. Packed with inspirational pictures of myself and pupils—fellows who became NEW MEN in strength, my way. Let me show you what I helped THEM do. See what I can do for YOU! For a real thrill, send for this book today. AT ONCE. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 7711A, 115 East 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 7711A
115 East 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of **"Dynamic Tension"** will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name .....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address .....

City ..... State .....

HOSPITAL and DOCTOR BILLS PAID!

HOSPITALIZATION PLAN

COVERS SICKNESS or ACCIDENT

● Do you know that an average of one person out of every ten becomes a hospital patient each year? More than 35,000 patients enter hospitals daily. You, or one of your family might be next! Don't go into debt or bankrupt your savings when Sickness or Accident strikes. Be prepared — protect yourself NOW!

PAYS BENEFITS FROM FIRST DAY

This dependable Hospitalization Plan PAYS YOUR BILLS FROM THE VERY FIRST DAY of Hospitalization, exactly as provided. Do not confuse this policy with the others that skip paying benefits for the first 7 or 14 days.

PAYS FOR LOSS OF INCOME!

In addition to Hospital and Doctor Benefits cash payment will be made for LOSS of TIME from work, due to accident disability, at the rate of $25 a week up to a total of $300.00, as stated in the liberal Loss of Time provision of the contract.

ISSUED TO INDIVIDUALS or FAMILIES

You or members of your family may be protected against Hospitalization resulting from Sickness or Accident. Everyone, in good health, from 6 months to 70 years of age can apply for policy.

CHOOSE YOUR OWN HOSPITAL and DOCTOR

Any recognized Hospital and any Doctor in the United States or Canada may be selected by you. You are not required to enter any particular Hospital under this liberal Hospitalization plan.

No Medical Examination—No Red Tape—No Agents

No medical examination is required. If you are in good health we take your word for it. Red tape as well as agents eliminated!

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Send no money — just mail the coupon. We will send you complete details and 10 day FREE Inspection offer. DON'T DELAY!

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3¢ costs about A DAY

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Maximum Benefit for Room, Board, General Nursing for each insured adult. Includes up to 90 days per year for Accident and up to 90 days per year for Sickness.

$25 Each Week LOSS of TIME $300
From work, by Accident up to 12 weeks.

DOCTOR EXPENSES $135.00
Maximum benefit for additional Medical or Surgical care while in Hospital due to injuries.

$1000.00
ACCIDENTAL LOSS of LIFE, LIMBS or ENTIRE SIGHT

Many other liberal benefits. All as plainly stated in Policy.

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George Rogers Clark Casualty Company
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Please rush FREE information about Hospital and Doctor's Expense Policy.

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY & STATE.....

Fill in coupon. Clip and paste to Postal Card or mail in envelope.